

JOURNALISTIC PROFESSIONALISM IN CHINA: DILEMMAS AND SOLUTIONS

ZILIN, W.¹ – BALARAMAN, R. A.^{1*}

¹ *School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author
e-mail: rani_balaraman[at]usm.my*

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Abstract. Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped journalistic professionalism in China, challenging the authority and normative functions of mainstream media. This study investigates the dilemmas faced by journalists in four major news organisations, namely People’s Daily, The Paper, The Beijing News, and Polar News within a rapidly evolving media ecosystem characterised by technological disruption, platform-driven communication, and increased audience participation. This study employed in-depth interviews with 16 purposively selected journalists to examine shifts in normative ideology, cognitive orientation, professional practices, and narrative performance. The findings reveal three central challenges, the erosion of core news values such as authenticity, truthfulness, and objectivity; professional dilemmas arising from political constraints, market pressures, declining institutional autonomy; and identity uncertainty and growing difficulties in agenda-setting due to platform algorithms and weakening public trust. The study identifies four strategic pathways to strengthen professionalism, which is organisational reinforcement of normative values, continuous capacity development, enhanced verification and expertise-based reporting, and renewed emphasis on public responsibility through transparency and empathetic communication. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how Chinese mainstream media navigate structural pressures while reconfiguring journalistic professionalism in the digital era.

Keywords: *journalistic professionalism, professional dilemmas, news values erosion, audience participation, China journalism*

Introduction

Professionalism has long been regarded as a central ideology of journalism, defining the standards, ethics, and practices that guide news production across cultures. The origins of journalistic professionalism can be traced to the United States during the mid-to-late 19th century, a period marked by the decline of partisan newspapers and the rise of the independent press (Xiaohuan, 2022). Early mainstream media organizations sought to institutionalize professional standards by supporting emerging journalism schools and publishing editorials promoting political neutrality, credibility, and fair competition (Nygren and Stigbrand, 2014). As Weaver and Willnat (2020) note, journalism developed as a system of values and practices centered on the dissemination of verified information, serving as a public service as well as a mechanism for monitoring authority. Professionalization refers to the concentration of specialized labor and occupational control (Waisbord, 2013), yet the meaning of professionalism has evolved over time (Berglez, 2013). Journalistic professionalism never exists in isolation; it is shaped by local political systems, economic structures, and cultural ideologies. While rooted in Western liberal democratic principles, its adaptation in non-Western contexts such as China reflects local realities. The concept of journalistic professionalism was formally introduced in China during the 1990s (Meng and Zhang, 2022). However, China’s socialist political structure which prohibits private media

ownership has fundamentally shaped its professional model (Weaver and Willnat, 2020). All Chinese media organizations are publicly owned, and function simultaneously as state instruments and commercial enterprises. Consequently, Chinese journalism embodies both political and economic attributes, constituting what Zhang (2009) describes as a hybrid professionalism that combines party loyalty with journalistic ethics, a framework often termed as “socialist professionalism with Chinese characteristics.”

The journalism industry in China is currently undergoing a period of instability influenced by market competition, technological disruption, and evolving audience behavior (Cohen, 2016). The digital revolution has redefined news production, distribution and consumption. The rapid rise of digital media has democratized access to information, allowing individuals to function as both producers and consumers of news. However, this transformation has also destabilized the traditional media ecosystem. Declining advertising revenue, shrinking newsrooms, the prevalence of short-term contracts, and the emergence of automated journalism have eroded the dominance of legacy media (Cohen, 2016). Within this shifting landscape, the core values of truthfulness, objectivity, and fairness face renewed pressure. Business-oriented media platforms prioritize engagement metrics and advertising income over journalistic integrity, leading to content shaped by algorithms and audience traffic (Waisbord, 2013). Some mainstream outlets adapted this by producing content that conforms to platform logic, compromising ethical standards in pursuit of commercial survival. This shift has weakened the authority of professional journalism and encouraged a culture of sensationalism, reducing complex reporting to superficial narratives (Zhang, 2009). Nevertheless, rigid adherence to traditional notions of newsworthiness is equally problematic in an era of media convergence. Thus, the challenge for Chinese journalism lies in redefining professionalism so that it remains relevant in a fast-changing digital environment while maintaining ethical principles.

The dilemmas confronting Chinese journalists are multifaceted, encompassing commercialization, politicization, and technological transformation. Historically, traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television operated as independent news agencies with distinct production and distribution systems. The rise of social media, however, has enabled public participation in information creation, challenging traditional gatekeeping roles (Blaagaard, 2013). As the media market becomes increasingly commercialized, news organizations prioritize profitability over public interest, favoring attention-grabbing content over accuracy and fairness (Meng and Zhang, 2022). The resulting tension between professional ethics and market forces contributes to declining journalistic standards and increasing public distrust. This environment has also prompted an exodus of experienced journalists and editors from the mainstream organizations. Many leave to establish their own media ventures or pursue freelance work, while those who remain often face disillusionment or burnout. Meanwhile, media convergence and the democratization of digital tools have blurred the boundaries between professional and amateur content creators. With smartphones and social media, ordinary citizens can record and disseminate news in real time, undermining the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists (Mengshan, 2015). This results in an identity crisis and highlights the instability of professionalism in a participatory media culture.

Political oversight further complicates the media landscape as state regulation continues to shape news production, constraining editorial autonomy and framing news

narratives according to official ideologies (Xin, 2018). Although China's media market is vast, ownership concentration among a few large outlets limits pluralism and innovation. This centralization fosters homogenized news content, weakening diverse perspectives and reducing the democratic function of journalism. Despite these constraints, the convergence of traditional and new media offers both challenges and opportunities. Integration allows mainstream outlets to expand their reach and modernize production methods. However, it also exposes them to commercial pressures that can erode long-standing professional values such as impartiality and truthfulness (Zeng et al., 2019). Therefore, the urgent task for Chinese journalism today is to reconcile economic viability, political control, and professional ethics within the digital ecosystem. Understanding these dilemmas and identifying sustainable strategies to preserve professionalism remains essential for the future of credible journalism in China.

Objective

To examine the dilemmas of journalistic professionalism in China and identify effective strategies to address these challenges.

Literature review

The literature on journalistic professionalism in China reflects the evolving relationship between media institutions, journalists, and society. Drawing on the Process Model of Journalists' Roles, previous studies discuss the development of professional values, the dilemmas that arise in practice, and the transformations brought by the digital era. The concept of professionalism in journalism originated in the United States in the 1870s and was introduced to China in the late 1990s. Scholars generally view professionalism as encompassing the principles of objectivity, authenticity, and truthfulness. Objectivity is regarded as the foundation of fair reporting, while authenticity remains central to maintaining credibility and public trust. Pan and Lu (2017) emphasize that professional journalism should enhance democratic public life through specialized knowledge and ethical commitment. In China, professionalism is conceived as the outcome of skill, training, and commitment to high standards. Professionalism through a sociological lens, linking objectivity, freedom, and public responsibility to actual newsroom practices. Meanwhile, Zhenzhi (2014) identifies three traditions that shaped Chinese journalism, intellectual enlightenment, political propaganda, and commercial journalism. Jin (2013) notes that strengthening internal media systems and journalists' competence is essential to sustain professionalism, as practice and institutional structure must complement each other.

In the era of new media, the boundaries of professionalism have become more fluid. Pan and Lu (2017) suggest that professionalism remains a guiding belief despite technological disruption, while a more flexible and open interpretation that aligns with the digital media environment. Chung and Nah (2014) argue that professional and citizen journalists can coexist through collaboration and negotiation. Incidents such as the Deng Yujiao case illustrate how online participation can supplement professional reporting, ensuring balanced and inclusive coverage (Shiwen, 2013). Globally, Jenkins and Tandoc (2019) show that crises such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks have reshaped ethical standards and reaffirmed the enduring value of professionalism. Professionalism is further challenged by the emergence of citizen journalism which lowers barriers to

entry and diminishes journalistic authority (Splichal and Dahlgren, 2016). This not only democratizes access to information but also contributes to de-professionalization, as unverified content circulates widely. Bossio and Holton (2018) highlight the tension journalists face between professional identity and personal expression on digital platforms. In an age of “shallow reading” and information overload, the space for in-depth reporting diminishes, weakening the interpretive power of traditional journalism.

Mainstream media continues to play a central role in shaping public opinion in China. Shenglin describes them as state-affiliated organizations that operate under party leadership, while the new mainstream media as hybrid entities that combine traditional journalism with online dissemination to promote national narratives. These outlets play a crucial role in shaping values and maintaining social stability (Shuai et al., 2020; Zhengfu, 2016). However, global media such as The New York Times often frame China’s initiatives negatively, reflecting broader geopolitical contestation (Yu and Yan, 2020). The integration of new and traditional media compels Chinese outlets to innovate. Boquan (2015) argues that convergence arises from shifting audience habits and the adoption of an “Internet mindset.” Platforms such as WeChat and Weibo have become essential tools for audience engagement (Sanjiu, 2018). Comparative studies shows similar dynamics in other countries: Rogstad (2016) in Norway, and Moon and Hadley (2014) in the United States reveal mutual dependence between social media and mainstream outlets in setting news agendas.

The People’s Daily exemplifies state-led convergence, using digital platforms to expand authoritative communication. While The Paper combines investigative rigor with multimedia storytelling (Zhengyu and Li, 2022), Beijing News and Polar News adopt innovative approaches to maintain public trust and credibility (Yue, 2023; Fang et al., 2022). These examples illustrate how Chinese mainstream media navigate professionalism within the constraints of regulation, commercial pressure, and digital transformation. In summary, journalistic professionalism in China is marked by conflict between tradition and transformation. Objectivity and truthfulness remain central ideals, yet they are increasingly tested by technological developments, audience fragmentation, and political influence. Mainstream media strive to uphold professional standards through convergence and innovation, yet dilemmas persist in balancing ethics, authority, and audience trust. As China’s media landscape evolves, professionalism is continually reshaped by the interplay of institutional control, technological adaptation, and the enduring pursuit of credibility.

Materials and Methods

This study employed in-depth interviews, a key qualitative research method involving face-to-face interactions to exchange views and construct meaning between the interviewer and respondents (Moore, 2015). 16 journalists from four mainstream media outlets, People’s Daily, The Paper, The Beijing News, and Polar News were selected through purposive sampling to ensure collection of comprehensive and relevant data. The interviewees included both editors and journalists, categorized as senior practitioners or general staff based on their years of experience. Purposive sampling is particularly suitable for exploring specific or minority issues in depth, providing high-quality and cost-effective data (Emmel, 2013). The sample selection adhered to the principle of data saturation, consistent with Guest et al. (2006) suggestion that qualitative studies typically reach saturation around 12 participants in homogeneous

groups, while Baker and Edwards (2012) propose a broader range of 12 to 60 participants, depending on the study's scope. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that summarizes textual content to identify recurring patterns and core themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Specific information about the interviewees is shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Summary of concise information from respondents.

Number	Media name	Gender	Age	Experience year	Position	Educational attainment
R1	People's daily	Female	25	3	Journalist	Bachelor of Journalism
R2		Male	27	4	Journalist	Bachelor of Digital Media
R3		Male	26	1	Editor	Master of Journalism
R4		Female	30	5	Journalist	Bachelor of Cinematography
R5	Beijing news	Male	27	3	Editor	Bachelor of Online New Media
R6		Female	25	1	Journalist	Master of Journalism
R7		Female	23	1	Journalist	Bachelor of Journalism
R8		Female	28	3	Journalist	Master of Journalism
R9	Polar news	Female	26	1	Journalist	Master of Journalism
R10		Female	27	3	Editor	Bachelor of Diplomacy
R11		Male	25	1	Journalist	Master of Journalism
R12		Female	48	15	Editor	Bachelor of Chinese Literature
R13	The paper	Female	26	3	Journalist	Bachelor of Journalism
R14		Male	31	9	Editor	Bachelor of Communication
R15		Female	25	3	Journalist	Bachelor of Journalism
R16		Female	27	2	Journalist	Master of Journalism

Results and Discussion

Through interviews, this study identified multiple dilemmas and potential strategies related to journalistic professionalism in four mainstream media organisations in China. The list below outlines the key dilemmas that have been identified: (1) The Erosion and Transformation of News Value; (2) Professional Dilemmas of Journalists; (3) Public Agenda Dilemma

The erosion and transformation of news value

According to Respondent 11, the credibility of mainstream media has weakened due to the erosion of core journalistic values such as truthfulness, objectivity, and transparency. The diminishing adherence to these values raises concerns about the reliability of information, the origins of news content, and the extent to which facts are verified or corroborated. This situation creates uncertainty among audiences regarding the authenticity of news, and exposes journalists and media organizations to risks associated with misinformation, misrepresentation, and accountability issues.

“I feel that the credibility of mainstream media has been declining, and it really needs to be strengthened again. For me, the media has to maintain its integrity and pay close attention to the authenticity of every news report. Information should be verified as much as possible, including checking with the relevant individuals. Transparency is also important, so people know where the information comes from, who said it, and the basic details behind it. This helps reassure the public and, at the same time, offers some level of protection for the media itself.”

(Respondent 11)

Respondent 10 points out that journalistic objectivity has increasingly become a passive form of self-protection rather than a genuine pursuit of truth. While many

journalists avoid forming conclusions to prevent controversy, some outlets misuse objectivity by relying on unverified claims from “reliable sources” to appear neutral. This can delay the revelation of truth, and weaken professional standards. The respondent also noted that journalists’ personal biases often shape reporting, as preconceived ideas influence question framing and information selection, eventually distorting the balance between neutrality and narrative intent and eroding true objectivity.

“When interviewing a county secretary in an impoverished area, I had already formed a preconceived image of her character, focusing on qualities like selflessness and integrity. Even when talking to local villagers about her past, I used guiding questions to fit this image and avoided asking anything outside my predetermined theme.”

(Respondent 10)

Respondents 5 and 6 indicated that using preconceived frameworks in interviews helps journalists meet demands for timeliness but risks oversimplify the stories by focusing on individual experiences instead of broader societal issues. Authenticity, once central to journalistic professionalism, is now under strain in the era of convergence media, where outlets compete with social and self-media for speed and attention. Respondent 6 noted that verification standards have weakened, with reports increasingly citing vague or unverified sources. Respondent 5 added that the surge of digital information makes it difficult to identify authentic and meaningful stories, further challenging journalistic integrity.

“I used to verify news through multiple sources and several rounds of checks, but nowadays many outlets rely on vague or unverified sources like “online rumors” or “an anonymous insider,” making it difficult to ensure authenticity.”

(Respondent 6)

“The biggest challenge is how the media landscape has shifted to digital and social platforms, creating an overwhelming flood of information. Finding valuable stories that grab attention has become a real struggle and makes choosing topics much more challenging.”

(Respondent 5)

Interview data from Respondents 4 and 11 reveal that prioritizing speed over accuracy has undermined journalistic authenticity. Traditional fact-checking in mainstream media has been compressed under pressure to deliver news rapidly, while online platforms now dominate visibility. Journalists are expected to act swiftly to capture trending stories, however this focus on timeliness often comes at the expense of verification, gradually eroding credibility and authenticity in reporting.

“I believe journalists need to be quick on their feet, meaning they should have a sense of urgency when it comes to news. Since I'm mainly responsible for recommending trending topics, I prioritize timeliness. If something is time-sensitive, it gets pushed to the forefront. For a media outlet to secure exclusive news, speed is crucial...”

(Respondent 4)

“News is essentially about what's new. So, I believe one of the core skills for a news reporter is to quickly and accurately gather information, capturing the essence of the news...”

(Respondent 11)

Respondent 13 pointed out that striking a balance between the demand for immediacy and the depth of news coverage can be challenging. On one hand, journalists face time constraints; on the other, when the public serves as the primary source of material, maintaining in-depth coverage becomes difficult.

“The dilemma we face often stems from the fact that nowadays, everyone has a smartphone and tends to record everything. So, a significant issue we're grappling with is the inability to be the first ones on the scene like other citizens, you know? We can't capture the content firsthand. And that's where our timeliness kind of falls short compared to those present. Plus, we can't guarantee the depth of news coverage either.”

(Respondent 13)

Professional dilemmas of journalists

Journalists in traditional media are increasingly facing time pressure, limited resources, commercialization, and political interference, contributing to professional anxiety. Once regarded as authoritative and objective, many now struggle with declining relevance amid the rise of digital and self-media platforms, where faster, audience-driven content often lacks professional rigor. Respondents expressed frustration over low pay, editorial constraints, and dwindling readership, noting that even quality reporting is overshadowed by viral, superficial content. As a result, journalism is increasingly perceived as a “sunset profession,” with authenticity and moral responsibility giving way to commercialism and algorithm-driven visibility.

“Even with print media adopting strategies like 'Two Weis and One End' and the full-media matrix, results remain unimpressive. Compared to self-media and online platforms, professionalism may remain, but articles struggle to compete for traffic. Being a journalist is increasingly seen as a “sunset” profession.”

(Respondent 10)

“Many traditional media reporters have left their jobs, and being a reporter is sometimes joked about as “news labor.” Daily article writing feels like moving bricks, with low pay. Market pressures and newspaper restrictions mean that even in-depth interviews often end up published in watered-down versions, which is frustrating.”

(Respondent 16)

The “golden era” of traditional media has passed, and many journalists now regard their field as a “sunset industry” with disrupted authority, reflecting deep professional anxiety. Mainstream media face policy restrictions, financial strain, and internal hierarchies, while market-oriented reforms coexist with political control. In the

convergence media environment, journalists are constrained by bureaucratic resource allocation and content management, often instructed to avoid sensitive issues and downplay negative reporting, leaving little room for independent or critical reporting.

I've noticed in local media that it's common for media heads and government departments to avoid controversy and minimize risk. I'm often asked to steer clear of sensitive topics, reduce criticism, and limit negative reporting. Sometimes, content is scrutinized heavily, approved interviews are canceled, or completed drafts are demanded to be changed. This kind of situation happens quite often."

(Respondent 2)

Restrictive management practices diminish journalists' motivation and passion. Mainstream media, particularly traditional outlets, face financial decline, low salaries, and challenging working conditions, forcing journalists to balance professional ideals with economic needs. The income gap between traditional and digital media prompts some journalists to reconsider their careers, illustrating how material pressures erode journalistic integrity and deepen the crisis of professionalism in China's media.

"In terms of challenges... I'd say the main thing is the salary. I had some experience working in the internet industry before pursuing my master's degree, and now, in traditional media, the pay is just not comparable to what I had before. Even though I've only been working for a year, I'm actually considering whether I should switch jobs or not."

(Respondent 4)

Apart from Respondent 4, many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their salaries and the inability to meet basic living needs.

"Our salary structure is basically composed of a base salary and earnings from articles. The base salary is linked to your job title level, like 'junior reporter' or 'senior reporter.' The earnings from articles involve metrics such as views and plays. As a 'junior reporter' just starting in the workforce, I have the lowest job title level. So, if I want a higher salary, I have to keep producing articles continuously, and they must be high-quality. Also, I focus on hot topics, and you know how it is, life is never calm. To put food on the table, it's like living in a constant battle every day – it's exhausting."

(Respondent 9)

The decline in profits among mainstream media organizations not only exerts significant pressure on practitioners but also affects internal management and editorial teams. Consequently, financial strain influences the decision-making processes of journalists and editors in news production. Essentially, a media organization functions as a content production factory with a systematic workflow, comprising journalists, editors, operations, and administrative staff, each playing distinct yet interdependent roles to ensure the organization's smooth operation. Traditionally, editorial and managerial functions in the media operated independently. However, in contemporary mainstream media organizations, all components, including journalists, must now balance considerations of both communicative effectiveness and revenue generation.

“...but now, with the pressure on revenue, you know, it's affecting us too. Some stories, even though they align with news value, you're aware that tackling these topics will surely result in poor data, and the video views won't pick up. So, even if it's valuable, most people would just give up.”

(Respondent 8)

Furthermore, ordinary audiences can capture content using their smartphones and upload it in the form of videos to the internet. They can also share events they witness or hear about on major social media platforms. This has become an undeniable and significant force, impacting the existing news production processes.

“.....The dilemma we often face is that, you know, nowadays, everyone has a smartphone and tends to record things. So, a significant challenge we're dealing with is that we can't be like other citizens who can be at the scene first and capture the content, right? Our timeliness, to some extent, is not as good as those who are physically present. But, well, that's unavoidable because news reporters can't always be at the scene right when things happen, you know.”

(Respondent 13)

Public agenda dilemma

The public nature of journalism emphasizes its role in serving society and guiding public opinion. However, in the post-truth era, audiences increasingly prefer sensational content and approach mainstream media with skepticism. This growing distrust undermines media credibility and weakens its authority in shaping public discourse. Unlike in the traditional media era, when audiences had strong confidence in mainstream outlets, today's audiences actively question news accuracy and demand greater transparency.

It's a matter of trust, I think. Many times, I feel like the authority of mainstream media has declined, and people don't trust you, don't buy into what you're saying. For instance, if you publish an article, people will come at you with questions. Nowadays, readers keep a real-time eye on the news, and they comment under relevant articles. If there are unclear or confusing points in the reporting, readers will dig deep and ask you to confirm the authenticity of the related coverage.” .”

(Respondent 1)

Media competition has intensified, and under market pressures, some news organizations prioritize profit over professionalism. In the pursuit of audience attention, these outlets often compromise ethical standards, neglect factual accuracy, and produce one-sided reports, resulting in frequent reversals in public opinion. Consequently, the credibility crisis faced by mainstream media is collective rather than individual, as unethical practices by a few outlets diminish public trust in the entire industry, a phenomenon reflecting the Tasso effect.

“... what's particularly evident is that I think doing news now is somewhat different from before. Nowadays, readers encounter a plethora of information on the internet, so they aren't satisfied with just news reports. We need to inform readers about how

journalists arrive at such conclusions, where my information comes from, and the methods we use to verify the authenticity of events. Otherwise, people will keep asking questions in the comments..... In a way, this can be called the Tocqueville effect.”

(Respondent 11)

So, what happened was, one media outlet didn't even bother to reach out to the people involved. They just went ahead and published this story saying, "According to online rumors, a guy cheating on his girlfriend caused multiple people in the Wuchang district of Wuhan to get infected with the coronavirus." Later on, other media outlets verified the information and found out that the guy didn't cheat at all. The girl mentioned in the online rumors? She's just a good friend. And even her parents and colleagues pitched in to clarify things.”

(Respondent 5)

The distinctive attributes of mainstream media endow a crucial responsibility to guide public opinion. Journalistic professionalism requires media to maintain independence, free from control by any interest groups, and deliver content with the highest public relevance to the audience, fulfilling the role of a social institution. However, when professionally produced content is not adopted by platforms and lacks effective distribution channels, the mainstream media faces a cognitive dilemma in balancing public interest with commercial imperatives.

“We often select topics with public significance and request media coverage. For example, a story about an elderly person being deceived by a nursing home was promoted to highlight real issues, but it failed to gain traction. Paradoxically, less controversial topics attract less attention than highly contentious ones...”

(Respondent 4)

Solutions

The following section outlines strategic, evidence-informed solutions designed to address the identified challenges comprehensively: (1) Requirements of Media Organizations (Normative Ideology); (2) Self-improvement for Journalists (Cognitive Orientation); (3) Advancement in Journalistic Practice (Professional Practice); (4) Focus on Social Responsibility (Narrative Performance)

Requirements of media organizations

The organization's stance and culture have a significant impact on journalistic practices while imposing various organizational-level demands on journalists. The first step in upholding journalistic professionalism is to maintain a firm stance. People's Daily has always adhered to the unwavering stance of serving the people. As the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China, People's Daily considers serving the public, disseminating accurate public opinion, and reflecting societal voices as its core mission. This stance is evident across its news reports, editorial comments, and special features.

“When working in such an official media environment, you actually need to be aware of the situation. It's like being a basketball team, you must follow the rules, or else the game will be chaotic. Our principle is to stand with the people, uphold the Party's basic line. That's the most fundamental. Secondly, the reporting has to be accurate and reliable, definitely not made up, and certainly not with those confusing headlines.....”

(Respondent 1)

“...the thing about The Beijing News is that it's this big urban daily newspaper jointly sponsored by Guangming Daily and Southern Daily, you know? And it's actually the first time in China that two party newspapers got together to run a newspaper like this. And their whole deal is about telling China's story well, and providing in-depth reporting as their standard. So, we kind of follow this company ethos, aiming to deliver the freshest, hottest, most valuable news every day, guided by this overarching company philosophy.....”

(Respondent 7)

By adhering to the people's stance, journalism can more effectively capture the authentic voices and lived experiences of society, fostering a fairer and more inclusive public discourse. In the era of convergent media, the boundaries of news content have expanded, with stories once deemed trivial, such as “adorable children,” “firefighters rescuing kids,” or “family reunions after child trafficking cases”, now becoming viral sensations. The success of these stories stems from their emotional resonance and ability to engage audiences directly through visually engaging and relatable content.

“Earlier, we released a video news about an adorable 11-month-old baby in Zhangjiakou, Hebei, doing snowboarding. The response was fantastic, and later, the child even appeared in the video of the Winter Olympics opening ceremony...”

(Respondent 9)

From the perspective of populism, it conveys more relatable and down-to-earth content. This allows the audience to experience humanistic care and emotional comfort in news coverage, establishing a stronger sense of connection with ordinary viewers. In addition to producing accessible and popular news, The Polar News specializes in uncovering heartwarming stories from everyday social life.

“Heartwarming news existed in the traditional media era, but at that time, journalists generally considered such news to lack sensationalism and seriousness. Therefore, they did not delve into exploring and disseminating "heartwarming news" as a distinct news category...”

(Respondent 9)

In the era of convergent media, heartwarming news engages audiences by conveying warmth and positive values. Mainstream media must uphold public values while competing with self-media and digital platforms. Some organizations are reinvesting in content production and collaborating with digital platforms. For example, The Beijing News partnered with Tencent News on the “Women Shipin (Our Video)” project, combining professional journalism with technological innovation.

Because nowadays, the prevailing trend is the combination of traditional and new media in reporting. So, we collaborate with domestic online media, specifically Tencent News. We team up because Tencent has this big data backend, allowing us to tap into user preferences. In terms of content production and public opinion, utilizing this big data, we can produce news that undergoes better scrutiny and precise delivery. After the delivery, we can also guide more effectively.”

(Respondent 7)

News aggregation platforms require high-quality content to attract users, while mainstream media relies on audience traffic to build brand influence. Standing out in this competitive environment requires content innovation and collaboration with major digital platforms. Within integrated media, mainstream outlets must preserve and amplify collective memory to reinforce journalistic professionalism, leveraging national celebrations, major events, and public emergencies to engage audiences and strengthen public connection.

In tackling major political topics like the 20th National Congress, the People's Daily focused on both form and content. In terms of form, creative dynamic posters were designed to interpret and present the reporting on the 19th National Congress, incorporating what we call data journalism. Additionally, alongside creative posters, innovative videos gained popularity. We employed techniques such as montage, hand-drawn cartoons, flash mobs, and others to make the videos stand out.”

(Respondent 1)

Self-improvement for journalists

Journalists' acceptance of institutional values shapes their self-expectations. Professional competence is crucial, as journalists influence the quality, credibility, and impact of news. They are expected to demonstrate strong knowledge, writing and interviewing skills, and ethical sensitivity. Competence involves not just accurately reporting facts but also understanding complex issues while maintaining objectivity and impartiality.

“At its core, reporters must know how to write. While news reporting requires down-to-earth, straightforward language that allows readers to grasp the truth of an event through your words, mainstream media still has professional requirements for the use of language in reporting.”

(Respondent 2)

“In real-world journalism, the practice of news professionalism can sometimes grapple with finding the right balance between timeliness and depth. There are instances when the pursuit of speed may impact the in-depth exploration of a story, especially in complex events where in-depth reporting becomes crucial.”

(Respondent 14)

By maintaining high professional competence, journalists help mainstream media deliver quality news, enhance credibility, and build audience trust, which is vital for

staying competitive and fulfilling societal responsibilities. While traditional media relied on a single format text for newspapers, audio for radio, and video for television, the converging media landscape and technological advances have broken these limitations.

“All the 'short videos' are presented in a vertical format, which aligns well with the reading habits of modern people. The content mainly focuses on heartwarming news and interesting news—news that is relatively easy to spread. It's convenient to take a look during leisure time. The browsing data for this section is quite impressive.”

(Respondent 8)

In the past, as a traditional media journalist, I just conducted interviews or used personal experience for a report. Today, I also need to consider audience interests, such as what appeals to young people or middle-aged viewers, beyond the traditional '5W' style of writing.”

(Respondent 16)

Current news products must emphasize the attributes of media integration, fully satisfying audience's sense of presence and providing a panoramic experience, comprehensively stimulating the audience's senses. This has posed further technological demands on journalists working in mainstream media.

Advancement in journalistic practice

Journalistic professionalism refers to the capability of journalists, developed through specialized training and education, to follow systematic procedures and possess professional skills. Journalists act as the eyes, ears, and voice of the society, propagating national policies and guiding public opinion. Professional media outlets and practitioners form the core pillars uphold journalistic standards. In daily practice, journalists ensure the authenticity of information through rigorous fact-checking. The principle of "fundamental content construction" demonstrates their commitment to professionalism within the integrated media environment. By tracking the truth of events, particularly trending topics and evolving public opinion, journalists conduct interviews with key figures, witnesses, and informants to recreate events or provide in-depth analysis. This approach allows them to expand and deepen information while maintaining objectivity and timeliness, ultimately enhancing the value and impact of reporting.

The media must maintain integrity, focusing on the authenticity of every news event, making efforts to verify information, and seeking supporting evidence from relevant parties whenever possible.”

(Respondent 4)

In the reporting of significant and unexpected public events, certain journalists excel at authentically reconstructing occurrences within their original context. . They are committed to comprehensive reporting, exploring the socially significant aspects underlying these events.

“During the Zhengzhou floods, I interviewed victims’ relatives to reveal the disaster’s reality, though it was emotionally difficult for them. I focused on touching stories from the front lines, such as the Blue Sky Rescue Team and a courageous young man in the internet café incident, aiming to evoke empathy while ensuring the reports remained meaningful.”

(Respondent 1)

“Because on our platform, when we carry out special planning, we often have the media find lawyers or experts to interpret relevant events from the industry, which makes it more professional.”

(Respondent 4)

This practice not only enhances the authority and credibility of reporting but also meets users’ and platforms’ demands for more professional, in-depth, and educational content beyond traditional news. Such initiatives help diversify reporting formats, improve content quality, and cater to audiences’ expectations for accessing and understanding information at multiple levels, thereby strengthening the platform’s significance and value. Journalists play a crucial role in this process, as their professional competence and knowledge background are essential. The unique nature of journalism requires them to possess interdisciplinary knowledge to interpret complex social events effectively. A solid foundation in news reporting ensures that journalists can provide accurate understanding, conduct in-depth analysis, and deliver meaningful content to audiences.

“Every professional in the field of journalism, during their academic period, needs to acquire fundamental expertise in their respective domains. The foundational prerequisite is to equip oneself with the essential knowledge required for becoming a proficient practitioner. Upon entering a workplace, particularly in a media organization or a newspaper, there is a need for extensive pre-employment training and education.”

(Respondent 16)

“The Journalist’s professional knowledge background is a cornerstone that supports their role in news reporting. Through continuous learning and expanding their knowledge base, journalists can better adapt to the evolving landscape of the journalism industry, improving the quality of their reporting and providing society with more profound and comprehensive information.”

(Respondent 5)

Focus on social responsibility

Journalists must selectively prioritize socially legitimate discourse to generate “moral significance” and uphold their responsibility to serve the public. In today’s technological context, mainstream media practitioners increasingly recognize a gap in understanding with audiences regarding news objectivity and authenticity. Ensuring the truthfulness and objectivity of content alone is no longer sufficient to meet audience expectations. To address the growing distrust between the public and the media, mainstream outlets are innovating the presentation of news. Through techniques such

as transparency and visualization, they aim to make information clearer and more accessible, gradually rebuilding audience trust while fulfilling their social responsibility.

“I think it is very important to clearly indicate the source of information in an article, including who is providing it. For example, I make sure to use phrases like “According to eyewitness xx” or “The involved party xx narrated” rather than vague expressions such as “reliable sources” or “It is reported.” When referring to individuals, I use their specific names, like “Mr. Zhang” or “Ms. Li,” instead of just titles without verifiable identities. I find that this approach helps the public trust the authenticity of the report and shows that the information has been carefully verified.”

(Respondent 3)

Another important aspect is ensuring transparency in the news information. It means clearly stating where the information comes from, who provided it, and providing essential details.”

(Respondent 1)

Transparent news production not only enhances public trust in the authenticity of reporting but also acts as a form of media supervision. In the multimedia era, some outlets often prioritize speed over traditional verification systems, focusing on real-time reporting. Emphasizing transparency encourages journalists to carefully scrutinize and verify all elements of news, reducing uncertainty in the production process. This approach supports public journalism and contributes to rebuilding media credibility. Additionally, focusing on issues related to people’s daily lives addresses public demand for practical and relevant information, helping audiences better understand events in their surroundings and make informed decisions.

‘People’s Daily’ is a party newspaper, and it is often said that we are the voice of the party and government. In terms of public responsibility, it can indeed be considered the main focus of our media. Our primary mission is to publicize the major policies of the party and reflect the interests and voices of the people. Firstly, it’s crucial to maintain objectivity and impartiality at all times.”

(Respondent 1)

Journalists’ focus on issues affecting people’s livelihoods reflects their societal responsibility and commitment to public service, contributing to a healthier and more positive social environment. Diverse reporting on public affairs is essential for delivering comprehensive and objective information, encouraging varied public opinions, and promoting dialogue. During the reporting process, journalists should interview a wide range of groups, including ordinary citizens, professionals, government officials, and social activists to ensure diverse perspectives are represented. By presenting multiple viewpoints and incorporating multimedia elements such as text, images, and videos, journalists can provide a fuller and clearer understanding of events, moving beyond a single perspective and enabling audiences to grasp the multi-dimensional nature of the news.

“During one Chinese New Year, we initiated a project called “Extraordinary You.” It was a collaborative effort involving journalists from over 50 cities nationwide, along with self-media creators, healthcare workers, police officers, delivery drivers, and security personnel. We documented their stories and compiled them into a special feature called “Extraordinary You.”

(Respondent 16)

“We need to promote diverse perspectives. Society is diverse, and opinions vary. We shouldn't only focus on one voice but strive to present a multitude of voices, allowing the public to have a more comprehensive understanding of issues. This requires us to listen to various viewpoints as much as possible in our interviews and reporting, maintaining fairness and objectivity.”

(Respondent 8)

The transformation of China's media landscape has significantly reshaped the contours of journalistic professionalism, driven by rapid technological development, intensified market competition, and the increasing participatory role of audiences. Technology remains the primary catalyst in altering the mechanisms of news production and dissemination (Huan, 2016). As technological empowerment expands access to information and lowers the barrier to content creation, the traditional monopoly of mainstream media in defining newsworthiness has weakened. The distinction between professional and non-professional news producers has become increasingly blurred (Blaagaard, 2013), while the communicative agency of audiences on digital platforms has strengthened, making them important contributors to the news production process (Cohen, 2016). This shift situates journalism within a more complex and decentralized media ecosystem, one that demands a rethinking of professional roles and values.

The process model of journalists' roles proposed by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) provides a valuable framework for understanding how journalists conceptualize what they should do, intend to do, are doing, and claim to be doing. Using this framework, the findings highlight three major challenges influencing journalistic professionalism in China, the erosion and transformation of core news values, the professional dilemmas experienced by journalists, and the increasing complexity of public agenda formation. The erosion of traditional news values such as truthfulness, authenticity, and objectivity is shaped by pressures of immediacy, the use of preconceived framing, and the overflow of fragmented information. The rise of digital platforms that prioritize speed over accuracy complicates journalists' ability to conduct multi-layered verification, a cornerstone of professional reporting. As timeliness becomes a dominant metric, accuracy is often compromised, exposing both journalists and news organizations to credibility risks. The respondents' experiences reflect this reality, where constraints of time, platform algorithms, and competitive pressures outweigh the normative ideals of the profession.

Both external and internal challenges contribute to the diminishing authority of journalism. Journalists are experiencing increased professional anxiety due to political restrictions, organizational constraints, and the declining economic viability of traditional media. Mainstream media practitioners struggle with reduced autonomy, limited freedom to conduct critical reporting, and editorial constraints imposed by institutional hierarchies. Many respondents expressed frustration toward declining incomes, workload pressures, and the growing misalignment between professional

ideals and institutional demands. This tension reinforces the perception of journalism as a “sunset profession,” in which professional identity becomes unstable. These concerns also resonate with global debates on the weakening professional authority of news workers in highly commercialized and digitized environments. At the same time, public distrust toward mainstream media further intensifies these dilemmas. The post-truth era has reshaped audience expectations, where transparency, participation, and dialogic communication are increasingly seen as essential. Merely providing objective information is no longer sufficient; audiences now demand clearer explanations of how journalists gather, verify, and interpret information. When the media fail to ensure this transparency, skepticism and misinformation flourish, often leading to a collective credibility crisis driven by individual cases of unethical reporting. The prevalence of viral rumors, platform-driven sensationalism, and the circulation of unverified claims online demonstrate how fragile public trust has become.

In this environment, collaborative forms of news production have emerged. Although the decentralization of news gathering poses challenges, it also introduces opportunities for mainstream media to leverage audience participation, professional expertise, and platform resources. The abundance of user-generated content has transformed news production into a more open system, where journalists work alongside audiences, eyewitnesses, and specialists who contribute contextual insights or primary materials. Such collaborative models enhance the depth and timeliness of reporting and reshape the construction of public knowledge. However, mainstream media must maintain their guiding role by filtering, verifying, and integrating information in ways that uphold professional standards (Schmidt et al., 2020). Collaboration, while beneficial, requires media organizations to preserve their professional identity to ensure the credibility and value of the news they produce. Beyond collaboration, journalists’ roles are evolving to encompass not only information verification but also interpretation and guidance. The complexity of digital information flows requires journalists to critically evaluate sources, debunk misinformation, and provide balanced perspectives grounded in expertise. The role of gatekeeping, once weakened by technological disruption, has regained relevance in the online environment (Loosen et al., 2020). Moreover, journalists are expected to demonstrate humanistic sensitivity by balancing hard news with storytelling that reflects empathy, emotional resonance, and social care. Such reporting is increasingly essential in a saturated information environment where audiences seek both factual understanding and emotional connection.

The discussion also emphasizes the importance of empathetic communication throughout the news production process. Facing fierce competition from online influencers, self-media, and entertainment-driven platforms, mainstream media must engage audiences through narratives that convey warmth, human interest, and emotional depth. Empathy, when grounded in factual accuracy, can strengthen public trust and reinforce journalism’s role in shaping social meaning (Glück, 2020). This, however, does not imply abandoning objectivity; rational empathy must complement factual reporting to avoid sensationalism. Another key strategy is enhancing transparency and visualization in news production. The transparency of information sources, verification methods, and reporting processes allows audiences to understand how news is created, thereby rebuilding trust (Solà et al., 2017). Visualization through data graphics, images, and videos further enhances clarity and audience engagement while supporting evidence-based storytelling. These practices align with Weber (2020) argument that

transparency reduces uncertainty in news production and contributes to a more accountable media environment.

Conclusion

The dilemmas of journalistic professionalism in China reflect the broader complexities of a rapidly evolving media ecosystem. As technological advances disrupt traditional workflows and weaken the authority of mainstream media, journalists must renegotiate their professional roles to remain relevant. The findings suggest that professionalism today depends on strengthened collaboration, reaffirmed ethical values, enhanced transparency, empathetic communication, and improved professional competence. While challenges persist, these adaptive strategies illustrate how mainstream media can continue to uphold public interest, regain authority, and evolve within the demands of contemporary society.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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