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Journalistic Roles among Chinese-Language Press Journalists in China and Malaysia

Shao Baohui^a, Nik Norma Nik Hasan^{b*}

^a*School of Journalism and Communication, Hebei University, Baoding, Hebei, 071002, China*

^b*School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, 11800, Malaysia*

Abstract

This comparative study examines the perspectives of journalistic roles among journalists for Chinese-language press in China and in Malaysia. Based on surveys of 230 Chinese journalists in Beijing and 228 Malaysian journalists in West Malaysia, this study concludes that both groups of respondents shared views on the following journalistic roles namely, dissemination, interpretive, adversarial and populist, as important functions in their practice.

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1. Introduction

Journalistic role is considered as one focal indicator that reflects journalists' professional values and practices (Beam et al., 2009). It is one aspect or component of journalistic professionalism (Lo, 1998; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996) and refers to journalists' views of basic media purposes (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986). In fact, "role conceptions reflect the occupational values that influence journalists' professional practices and decision making" (Beam et al., 2009). By exploring journalistic roles among journalists in a particular situation, it can reflect the institutional restraints to journalism in practice, and on the other hand, it can predict the tendency of journalism industry (Pan &

* Corresponding author.. Tel: +604-653 4199; Fax: +604-657 7736
E-mail address: niknorma@usm.my

Chan, 2005).

Chinese language is the most used language in printed newspapers all over the world (Chen, 2006). Mainly published in China, it is also spread widely to many other countries, including Malaysia. China and Malaysia are developing countries in Asia with similar rapid-pace economic development in recent decades. The Chinese-language press in both countries not only uses the same language but also serves similar group of target audience – the Chinese. However, the Chinese newspapers have been operated in different contexts in the two countries.

China is no doubt a “newspaper empire” because of its largest daily circulation in the world - nearly one thousand million copies of 1918 newspapers per day in 2012. In contrast, there are only fourteen Chinese-language dailies, six in West Malaysia and eight in East Malaysia. Nonetheless, as vernacular media in a multicultural society, the Chinese-language newspapers can be seen mainstream media providing news and information for the local Chinese (Kou, 2006; Siew, 2009; Chang, 2011). Additionally, Malaysia has always been regarded as the most prosperous Chinese-language newspapers area outside China (Wu, 2010; Peng, 2007). To some extent, both countries could be typical representatives of the Chinese-language press in the world.

2. Literature review

In their seminal study, Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman, (1976) clarified U.S. journalists’ views on journalistic roles into two broader clusters of roles - neutral and participant functions. In later emulating studies, first, Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) identified three journalistic functions - interpretive, disseminator, and adversarial – perceived by the journalists; then, Weaver and his colleagues revealed U.S. journalists endorsed four journalistic functions, namely interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996; Weaver et al., 2007). It is worth noting Johnstone et al. (1976) and Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes and Wilhoit, (2007) both found that most U.S. journalists did hold journalistic functions which combined elements from each perspective. In other words, the journalists had priorities in terms of role conceptions, but these priorities were not exclusive. In addition, Weaver et al. concluded that the interpretive function was the dominant role practiced among the journalists and item-wise, they found two journalistic roles were rated extremely important in their studies of 1986, 1996, and 2007, namely getting information to the public quickly and investigating government claims. Besides, Henningham (1998) found three journalistic functions and the two top journalistic roles among Australian journalists identical to U.S. journalists indicated by Weaver and Wilhoit (1986, 1996).

By comparing the professional roles of Russian and U.S. journalists, Wu et al. (1996) concluded that disseminating information quickly was the distinct chief concern of the journalists from those two countries; while setting the political agenda, which the Russian journalists rated more highly than their U.S. counterparts, was the most striking difference by single-item measures.

As for China, Chen et al.’s study (1998) of 1995 was one of the earliest surveys on Chinese journalists around the country. Item-wise, they found the journalists rated the media roles of performing chiefly as information provider, interpreting the current affairs, and acting as government mouthpieces in sequence. Yu’s (1998) national survey of 1997 found that information provider, acting as government mouthpieces and exercising opinion supervision on government were rated important in sequence. Yu also found the journalists had strong intention to push the society forward.

Then, Lu and Yu (2003) presented a portrait of Shanghai journalists, which indicated that the journalists preferred journalistic role of providing accurate information as soon as possible. Wu (2009) replicated Lu and Yu’s study in Zhejiang province and presented similar results to that of Lu and Yu’s. Wu also concluded that the Chinese journalists could hardly be called professionals. Lin surveyed Guangzhou journalists and got similar conclusions as well. Notably, Lin added the statement of “Make profits” which was rated relatively important by the journalists.

It should be noted that the researches on the Chinese journalists used single-item measures only. However, Pan and Chan found that four journalistic functions of Shanghai journalists corresponded to the four specified by Weaver and Wilhoit (1996). They also concluded that the journalists viewed the professional roles more desirable than that of the party’s mouthpiece. However, they failed to confirm entertainment function because the items added could not be grouped into a new one.

Unfortunately, there have been no relevant empirical studies on journalists for Chinese-language press in Malaysia until nowadays. However, some researchers did mention the roles of Chinese-language press in Malaysia. For example, Lim (1998) pointed out that defending Chinese culture, Chinese education, and interests of Chinese community are the tradition of the local Chinese press. And Siew (2006) regarded the Chinese-language press in

Malaysia as a medium for dialogues between different races and religions, a watchdog and as a media conveying information.

3. Methods

In practice, there are four types of newspapers in China, namely party newspapers, metropolitan newspapers, industry papers, and life-service newspapers, while in Malaysia the Chinese-language press is commercialized newspapers. For this study, metropolitan newspapers in China will be purposely chosen because they are circulated through the market not through the administrative system and they show a relatively high level of commercialization of print media.

Certain areas will be chosen to represent the countries respectively. China has 34 administrative districts (including Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan). The press in each administrative district generally has internal homogeneity in Mainland China. In this study, Beijing, the capital and the administrative and cultural centre of China, is chosen to stand for China. Currently, Beijing has seven metropolitan newspapers owned by different media groups. On the other hand, Malaysia is a federation of thirteen states and three federal territories. It would be difficult to choose just one state to represent the country because Chinese-language newspapers, as ethnic press in Malaysia, are not published in each state of the country. Arguably, West Malaysia could stand for the country due to the historical, economical and political discrepancies, and indeed, the former studies related to Malaysia generally focused on West Malaysia. Similarly, the six Chinese-language dailies published in West Malaysia are owned by different media groups as well.

Three Metropolitan newspapers purposely chosen in China are *Beijing Evening*, *Beijing Youth Daily*, and *the Beijing News* in Beijing, and three newspapers chosen in Malaysia are *Sin Chew Daily*, *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* and *Oriental Daily News* in West Malaysia. Through a stratified PPS (proportional to population size) sampling, the journalists in each given media organization were selected quotably based on the formula of 40% vs 60% adopted by approximate proportion of editors and reporters. 600 questionnaires were distributed - with 300 in each country and 100 in each organization - and collected with the aid of one or two acquaintances working in the selected organizations from both countries in July and September of 2013, respectively. 230 were returned with a response rate of 76.7% in China and 228, 76% in Malaysia.

The questionnaire contains twenty items on journalistic role from the literature, fifteen based on Weaver et al (2007) and others adopted from Chen, Zhu and Wu, (1998), Lu and Yu (2003). This study truly used many of the similar statements; however, some were altered to make them more suitable to the Chinese respondents in both countries.

Since the respondents rated each item by using a five-Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), the data obtained from the survey would be explained by using the mean scores of the items. For this study, the mean scores between "1.00-2.00" stand for the attitude of "Strongly Disagree" of the respondents, with "2.01-3.00", "3.01-4.00", and "4.01-5.00" standing for "Disagree", "Agree", and "Strongly Agree", respectively.

4. Findings

As shown in Table 1, when compared by single-item measures, the journalists from China and Malaysia both ranked "Get information to the public quickly" the first, which was somewhat accepted by journalists all over the world (Weaver, 1998). They also both strongly supported "Concentrate on news that's of interest to the widest possible audience", which ranked the third. Hence, it is manifested that the journalists in both countries generally aspired to play a key role serving for public interests. However, the Chinese respondents ranked "Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems" the second, while the Malaysian respondents ranked "Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public" the same place which the Chinese journalists ranked the ninth. This striking and interesting difference here maybe result from the status of vernacular media of Chinese-language newspapers in a multicultural society of Malaysia- which has always been considered as part of a transmission chain for Chinese culture that was first brought here by their immigrant forefathers (Siew, 2009).

Table 1. Mean scores of journalistic roles

Journalistic roles	China	Malaysia
Get information to the public quickly.	4.71 (1)	4.41 (1)
Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems.	4.60 (2)	4.08 (8)
Concentrate on news that's of interest to the widest possible audience.	4.55 (3)	4.19 (3)
Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified.	4.47 (4)	4.15 (6)
Provide analysis and interpretation of international developments.	4.37 (5)	4.04 (10)
Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly skeptical of their actions.	4.36 (6)	4.04 (9)
Motivate ordinary people to get involved in public discussions of important issues.	4.30 (7)	4.12 (5)
Be an adversary of businesses by being constantly skeptical of their actions.	4.28 (8)	3.88 (13)
Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public.	4.26 (9)	4.28 (2)
Discuss national policy while it is still being developed.	4.25 (10)	4.00 (11)
Be an adversary of social groups by being constantly skeptical of their actions.	4.24 (11)	3.86 (14)
Investigate claims and statements made by the government.	4.22 (12)	4.00 (12)
Give ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs.	4.21(13)	3.88 (4)
Point people toward possible solutions to society's problems.	4.19 (14)	3.86 (7)
Provide entertainment and relaxation..	3.85 (15)	3.74 (15)
Disseminate and explain government regulations and party policies.	3.45 (16)	3.42 (17)
Set the political agenda.	3.40 (17)	2.50 (19)
Promote hero role models.	3.29 (18)	3.42 (16)
Make profits	2.69 (19)	2.82 (18)
Act as mouthpiece of the ruling party/parties.	2.53 (20)	1.75 (20)

Note: Figures in brackets are the rankings.

Reversely, the respondents in both countries rejected “Act as mouthpiece of the ruling party/parties” and “Make profits”. Additionally, the Malaysian journalists rejected “Set the political agenda”, either. It is clearly demonstrated that the respondents from both countries did not want to collude with the government or focus on the non-essential roles such as acting as mouthpiece or making profits. It is worth noting that the Malaysian respondents disagreed on “Act as mouthpiece of the ruling party/parties” more strongly than the Chinese journalists.

Notably, it would be somewhat surprised that the Chinese journalists disagreed with “Act as mouthpiece of the ruling party/parties” and rated it the least important one, which seemed contradictory to the stipulations set by the government. To some degree, it might indicate that the propaganda system in China is facing crisis because journalistic professionalism has formed part of attitudes of the Chinese journalists (Lu & Pan, 2002).

Then, factor analysis of items indicated five journalistic functions when two statements - “Set the political agenda” and “Make profits”- were discarded due to poor fit in the analysis. They were dissemination, interpretive, adversarial, populist, and propaganda functions, which the former four can respond to U.S. journalists, with the last one reflecting current situation in both countries, especially in China.

Specifically, the dissemination function contains “Get information to the public quickly”, “Concentrate on news that’s of interest to the widest possible audience”, “Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified”, and “Provide entertainment and relaxation”; the interpretive function contains “Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems”, “Provide analysis and interpretation of international developments”, “Discuss national policy while it is still being developed”, and “Investigate claims and statements made by the government”; the adversarial function contains “Be an adversary of social groups by being constantly skeptical of their actions”, “Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly skeptical of their actions” and “Be an adversary of businesses by being constantly skeptical of their actions”; the populist function contains “Motivate ordinary people to get involved in public discussions of important issues”, “Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public”, “Give ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs”, and “Point people toward possible solutions to society’s problems”; and the propaganda function includes “Disseminate and explain government regulations and party policies”, “Promote hero role models”, and “Act as mouthpiece of the ruling party/parties”.

Table 2. Mean scores of journalistic functions.

Journalistic Functions	China	Malaysia
Dissemination Function	4.40 (1)	4.12 (2)
Interpretive Function	4.35 (2)	4.03 (3)
Adversarial Function	4.30 (3)	3.93 (4)
Populist Function	4.24 (4)	4.19 (1)
Propaganda Function	3.09 (5)	2.84 (5)

Note: Figures in brackets are the rankings.

Table 2 shows clearly that the journalists in both countries shared the journalistic functions broadly similar to each other, which they both embraced the four journalistic functions, namely dissemination, interpretive, adversarial, and populist function. However, the clear different attitude among the journalists was toward propaganda function. The Chinese journalists accepted the function at a low level while the Malaysian respondents rejected the function. Possibly, that is because nearly the China’s newspapers are still state-owned or “state property” (Hu, 2007). In addition, the Chinese journalists were more agreeable on the adversarial function than the Malaysian respondents.

If compared by the rankings, the Chinese journalists also ranked the propaganda function the last, same to their Malaysian counterparts. However, the most striking difference is about the populist function, which the Chinese journalists listed the fourth while the Malaysian journalists ranked the first. To some degree, it is possibly because the Chinese-language newspapers are published along the ethnic line in a multi-cultural society which the official language is *Bahasa Malaysia*. However, Chinese press, Chinese schools and Chinese associations and guilds are considered as “three pillars” of the triangulation supporting the Chinese community. Hence, the Chinese-language press plays an important role to “articulate and even to help shape the aspirations of the community” (Siew, 2009).

5. Conclusions

The Chinese and Malaysian journalists were quite close to each other in their perceptions toward professional roles. They both strongly endorsed the role of getting information quickly to the public and rejected the role to act as mouthpiece and make profits. Additionally, they embraced journalistic functions transferred from western countries, namely dissemination, interpretive, adversarial, and populist, as important functions in their practice, which could give new evidence to Splichal and Sparks’ (1994) conclusion that similarities across countries should prevail if journalism is really becoming a profession. However, there are some notable differences on propaganda function as well as the rankings of the role items between their perceptions. Although the Chinese journalists rejected the single item of acting as mouthpiece of the ruling party, they still accepted the propaganda function at a low level because of party-controlling media system in the country; on the other hand, the Malaysian journalists rejected propaganda function somewhat strongly and they preferred populist function in order to articulate the aspirations of the minority ethnic group of Chinese community in Malaysia. This could also be a kind of warning that the universal and the specific dimensions of professionalism should be considered when conducting relevant studies (Wu, Weaver & Johnson, 1996).

It cannot be denied that the other media employees, especially the new media workers are acting as a more and more important role in the information era in both countries even around the world. Hence, it is necessary to extend with other media journalists in the future study. Additionally, since some scholars (e.g. Yu, 1998) found that there was a discrepancy between journalists' attitudes and behaviors, and since there has been a doubt on the extent to which the journalists say in the survey is congruent with what they do in daily practice, more field observations need to be conducted to get a further and better understanding of journalistic roles as well as journalistic professionalism in practice.

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