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More than Mouthpieces



Emerging News Norms in the Chinese Press



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Abstract

This case-study explores the changing norms guiding news production in the People's Republic of China. Through a content analysis of bird flu coverage in three best-selling Guangzhou newspapers (the *Guangzhou Daily*, the *Yangcheng Evening News* and the *Southern Metropolis Daily*), the news coverage of the bird flu is compared to the *Party news* genre, previously dominant in China in which news is reported from the perspective of the Party and chosen on the grounds of its relevance to the tasks of the Party. Working from a model of normative change proposed by Piotr Sztompka, the content analysis suggests that although Party news norms are still significant to news production in China, these norms are often evaded in favor of more marketable alternatives. The inclusion of negative news, infotainment, consumer segments, editorials and investigative journalism in the material analyzed suggests that macro-level change is resulting in more diversified information mediated by China's news outlets. However, innovation in news practice is tempered by restrictions imposed by for example Chinese media policy, the market, ownership structures and vested interests of local authorities. The result is a patchwork of differing news norms functioning side-by-side in Guangzhou's booming media industry.

Key words: avian influenza, bird flu, China, media, norm, normative change

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1 Introduction

The traditional role of the media in China as the '*throat and tongue*' of the Communist party is being re-written. Against the backdrop of the country's surging economic growth and the gradual strengthening of civil liberties, the media is - periodically - setting the political agenda in China (Washington Post Aug 1, 2004), and the country's press corps is predicted to play an increasingly important role as China grows in wealth and political strength (de Burgh 2003:2). Especially in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou - one of the first cities in China to introduce market reforms - the government has tested liberalization policies which have later filtered out to the rest of the country, resulting in an increasingly autonomous media sector (Ma 2000:23). Brand diversification among China's nascent media conglomerates, which started in Guangzhou, has led to increasingly diversified information including spiraling entertainment and infotainment reporting (Chan 2003:161). However, despite their growing independence and state-endorsed commercialization of the Chinese media, journalists in China still negotiate a sector characterized by erratic reforms, a culture of self-censorship and periodic government clampdowns.

The coverage of infectious diseases has proved to be a useful yardstick of the Chinese press's ability to independently inform. The Chinese Party-state has shown reluctance to publicize diseases. Both at local and central levels of government there is fear of political consequences brought on by public panic, social instability, or economic downturns that an outbreak of infectious disease might bring with it (Lai 2004:77). The SARS epidemic in 2003, China's drawn out struggle with HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B, tuberculosis and - since its appearance in Hong Kong in 1997 - bird flu have caused international reviews and discussions of how far the Chinese media has come from its function as a Party mouthpiece allocated to it under Mao.

This thesis, which was researched during a minor field study in Guangzhou, explores the changing norms which guide news production in the People's Republic of China through a content analysis of the bird flu coverage in the Guangzhou press, when bird flu became headline news in China's newly commercialized press.

2 Background

Strong norms exerted by the Party-state have shaped news practice in China. This synopsis of Chinese media history under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) discusses how news in China has been produced primarily as an ideological tool of the Party. However, dramatic changes in state-ideology catalysed by Deng Xiaoping's historic tour of southern China, during the winter 1991-2, opened Chinese newsrooms to more diversified, market-oriented news practices.

2.1 From revolution to 'Southern Progress'

Like the Bolsheviks, from whom the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) received instruction, (de Burgh, 2003:15 & 45) the CCP regarded the media as a key element in its revolutionary struggle (Chan 2003:159). From the 1920s to the 1950s, as the CCP formed and eventually took power, the media's mission was to tell people how to think and act. The media was filled with content 'designed to socialize their audience with the values of communism' (Jakubowicz 2003:366)¹.

As with Soviet journalism (Lauk 2005:180), Chinese journalism was judged not by professional, but by political and ideological standards. Journalists, as agitators in the class struggle, were forced to sacrifice objectivity on the altar of a '*line of truth*'. A statement's '*truth*' was determined by its '*class nature*', in effect, whether the statement could be seen as representing the interests of a certain social class (de Burgh 2003:45). Since the press was financed by the Party-state, economic competition was unnecessary and the media were only required to concentrate on propagating the directives of the Party (Lauk 2005: 171). In the tradition of classic Communist media systems, there was no sanctioned alternative forum, and the media system was designed so that the Party had exclusive control of all institutionalized social communications (Sükösd 2000:125). The control of the media by the state in Communist society was in theory absolute; however, comparative country studies make it clear media systems and relative freedoms varied between countries under Communist rule. Poland during the 1980's for example, where the Church media and oppositional underground media provided a secondary, alternative forum for discourse, forms a sharp contrast to Romania

¹ Jakubowicz, Lauk and Sükösd, used as sources here, all refer to Soviet and Eastern European journalism under Communism. Some of the analysis draws on the observations of these authors, where Soviet and Chinese journalism practices were alike.

under the heavy-handed totalitarian control of Nicolae Ceausescu (Sparks 2000: 40).

Despite an essentially a top-down flow of news in China, the Party's press policies were held up as a two-way communication model, since journalists - in theory - expressed the needs of the people to the Party. In line with the logic of CCP press theory, the needs of the masses are met by the Party, which itself is composed of the most far-seeing elements of Chinese society, and is able to define the interests of the people through an active 'dialogue' with the people (Zhao 1998:25).

"You travel to all locations. The people depend on you to voice their demands, difficulties, experiences and even to describe mistakes in our work. You turn them into news, features, and reports to Party Committees at various levels, and to the Central Committee. In this way, you make a connection between the Party and the masses."

Liu Shaoqi²

In practice, this has meant that select journalists report on problems in Chinese society, which were printed in internal reference journals and circulated among ranking Party officials - a role which senior journalists still perform.

The practice of publishing critical news only in internal journals means that citizens are excluded from the very information that is important for them to influence policy (Zhao 1998:30). Furthermore, in a Party-press model, since journalists only report finished party policy there is very little possibility for the citizens to influence policy or how it is implemented. Concepts such as the people's right to know, informed citizenry or participatory democracy do not fit into such a model (ibid:30). Although the media is described as a 'bridge' between the Party and the masses, the media is not conceptualized or given the means to perform any watchdog role. Under the Party-press system there is no system of checks and balances, nothing to insure that the Party or the media are accountable to the people (ibid:28). The media is conceptualized the media as the Party's 'throat and tongue' (Zhao 1998:19). The media's role lay in bringing Party policy to the masses.

Under a Party-press model, the media system was an exclusive channel of institutionalized mass communication of the Party (Sükösd 2000:124). Any form of public discourse, from social and political issues to policy debates and entertainment was defined and dominated by Communist authorities (Sükösd 2000:124). Until the 1980s the Party-line was promoted by journalists from mixed sense of mission, gullibility and fear (de Burgh 2003:21). Contradictions between theory and practice were often obvious to those involved, as this description of a CCP propaganda campaign makes clear:

² Liu Shaoqi was President of the People's Republic of China April 27, 1959 - October 31, 1968 source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liu_Shaoqi The quote above is cited in Zhao 1998: 25.

Instructions go out to local Party authorities...secretly to prepare for a campaign. The local organizers in the school, office, factory, or committee decide in advance who will be victims, who will be forced to confess sins and whether each will be forgiven and in what way. At the start of the campaign the mass media proclaim the slogans to be featured, generally by describing how some group of workers or persons somewhere 'spontaneously' began raising these slogans and acting in accordance with them. Suddenly from all over the country, as if by magic, response and imitation begin.

(Pool 1973:495 cited in de Burgh 2003:46)

Like other countries under Communist rule, contrasts between ideology and people's everyday lives often taught people in China how to read between the lines of Communist ideology. To regain legitimacy after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP allowed a general liberalization, and, during the late 1970s, the media industry started opening up to reform and commercialization. However, the spark for the explosive commercialization that was to transform the Chinese media was lit in 1992 with Deng Xiaoping's tour south.

2.2 After 'Southern Progress' - continuity and commercial change

The winter of 1991-1992 marked an ideological sea-change in China. In an attempt to outmaneuver Leftist ideologues in Beijing, then Vice-Chairman Deng Xiaoping toured southern China hailing the development of the rapidly modernizing southern Chinese provinces and encouraging a faster pace of economic reform (Zhao 2004:46). Since the Leftist faction who opposed Deng effectively controlled the Propaganda Department, Deng's tour south was kept out of the Chinese media for over two months (de Burgh, 2003: 23). But as support for Deng's reform program grew, southern newspapers started reporting Deng's, 'Southern Progress' and calling on market liberalization. In an interview, a journalist underlined the importance of the event:

Before the progress there was a great feeling of despair. Then all the reporters, as soon as they heard about it, wanted to report it, but they could not. When it came out, they considered there was no turning back. After the Progress everything changed.³

From 1992, Leftist party ideologues were effectively marginalised; (Zhao, 2004: 46) and since liberal and democratic forces had been suppressed in a massive crackdown following the Beijing Spring of 1989, what was left was the state's 'all out embrace of the market.' (Zhao 2004:46)

³ A quote from *The Chinese Journalist* (2003) by Hugo de Burgh - the quote is from an interviewee however the author has chosen to keep the interviewee's identity anonymous.

Following Deng's tour round southern China, economic reform, which had commenced in 1978 with the Four Modernizations Campaign, took on spectacular momentum. The introduction of private land, commercial housing, stock markets and free labor markets, all marked the return to a type of free-wheeling capitalism which the Communist Party now defended. While the CCP came to power claiming to represent 'the counter-bourgeois publics of farmers, workers and other oppressed social groups' the Party has since the 1990's re-modeled itself (Zhao 2004: 44), and now represents entrepreneurs and businessmen as well. This ideological switch was best captured by the Party's, Three Represents Doctrine presented in 2000 (Zhao, 2004: 44), in which the Chinese Communist Party claims to represent the majority of people, the most advanced culture and the most advanced productive forces. 'Communism, as an ideology of class struggle, egalitarianism, proletarian dictatorship and public ownership of property' exists now only as a fading 'discursive convention' in China (He 198, 2003).

Despite rapid privatisation of previously state-run sectors, the newspaper industry has been kept under state ownership and tutelage. However since economic reforms spun from 1992, newspapers must, to a growing extent, fend for themselves on the market, and significant private involvement is now allowed. All newspapers are being weaned off direct state subsidies, and whereas previously state institutions and work-units were forced to subscribe to a large range of newspapers and periodicals - keeping their circulation figures high - subscription is to a growing extent now voluntary (*Far Eastern Economic Review* July 1st, 2003).

There is currently a significant tension between market-bred incentives to publish fast and extensive news coverage and the Party-state's reluctance to disseminate information in order to stave off instability and dissent.

The Party Principle, first outlined during the pre-revolutionary war years is still taught at journalism schools. So, despite huge changes taking place in China since the explosive market-liberalization fuelled from Deng's 'Southern Progress' in 1992, 'The Party Principle' has remained rhetorically intact (He 2003: 202). However, as empirical evidence analyzed in this thesis attests, other norms and types of narratives are now growing in prominence and openly contest Party news norms.

3 Aim

The aim of this thesis is to explore the norms which characterize news coverage in the People's Republic of China, and discuss how these norms have emerged by relating them to the political and economic environment of the mainland Chinese press.

The thesis has the empirical ambition of analyzing and mapping the coverage of bird flu in Guangzhou during the fall of 2005. Through a content analysis of the primary material, consisting of articles about bird flu in three Guangzhou daily newspapers over a three month period; the reporting in the Guangzhou media is contrasted to the type of Party journalism and news coverage which were dominant in China before widespread economic reforms of the Chinese press in the late 1990's.

Secondary material, consisting of bird flu coverage in other mainland Chinese newspapers and in the Western - mainly Anglophone - press, as well as interviews with journalists and bloggers working in greater China, will be used to complement, expand on and explain the primary material.

From these broader aims, two concrete research questions emerge:

- 1) Which norms characterize the news coverage of bird flu in the Guangzhou press during the fall of 2005?
- 2) How is the change in the norms which guide Chinese news production taking place?

3.1 Structure

To analyze news in the Guangzhou press this thesis uses theoretical model in which news is understood as a product of norms. In the next chapter (Chapter 4) the theoretical grounding of the thesis is outlined: the concept norms and norms guiding Chinese news are discussed. Piotr Sztompka's theories of normative change which will be used to describe changes in news in China are also outlined. Following this discussion of theory, the research method and is outlined in Chapter 5, and the Party news norms genre, a previously dominant genre of news in China, is defined. Chapter 6, is a content analysis of three months of bird flu coverage collected from the fall of 2005. Chapter 7 discusses the findings of the content analysis and relates the results to macro-level change taking place in China. Chapter 8 provides a summary of the main findings in the research.

4 News as Norms

Social life is regulated by norms (Giddens 1997:211) which are conceived as rules influencing the thought and conduct of an individual (Sztompka 1993: 250). They can be both expressed and unexpressed; their power is both coercive and imperative, as Durkheim describes:

“Here are ways of acting and thinking, and feeling that present the remarkable property of existing outside individual consciousness. These types of conduct or thought or are not only external to the individual but are, moreover, endowed with an imperative and coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him, independent of individual will.”

(Durkheim 1972 cited in Szompka 1993:64)

News, in turn, can be conceived as a product of a cluster of norms which determine what is newsworthy, and how it should be reported. Like all norms, those regulating news practice change over time. Illustrating this in an ambitious comparative country study, Høyer et al. look at the evolution and diffusion of the what they term ‘*the news paradigm*’ - a normative cluster, sprung from mainly Anglo-American practice which has come to guide news production in many places around the world (Høyer et al. *passim*: 2005).

The elements of the news paradigm include for example, an inverted pyramid structure for news narrative, in which the most important event in such a narrative is reported first; journalistic objectivity as the ideal of accuracy, balance, fairness and neutrality; and the news interview as a method of cross-examining information sources (Høyer et al., 2005: 11). In China, however, as in many other countries, a different set of norms have guided news production under the Chinese Communist Party – which has led to a particular notion of news which referred to here as Party news.

4.1 Party news norms

Party news in China constitutes an amalgamation of Soviet practice, which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) learned from their Bolshevik instructors; (de Burgh, 2003:15 & 45) older Chinese news norms, such as a didactic prose style, sustained during Communist rule, (Zhao 1998: 26) and also practices developed under the CCP. The function of the media as a mouthpiece for party policies, for example, became entrenched during the war years when the CCP’s local branches

were scattered. Newspapers were, during those years, the primary means by which policies and ideology were spread and were therefore regarded as an important method of maintaining Party unity (Zhao 1998:19).

The underlying concept which guided media policy as the CCP took power was called the *Party principle*. It dictated that the media must accept the Party's ideology and leadership and that media has a responsibility to propagate the Party's policies and work according to Party organisational principles and press policies (Zhao 19:1998).

The media's role according to Mao lay in bringing, 'the Party-program, the Party-line, the Party's general and specific policies, its tasks and methods of work before the people in the quickest and most extensive way.' (Mao: 1961 quoted in de Burgh 2003: 46)

Party news in China is about 'party and government policies, creative experiences, local adoptions of policies, and the achievements of individual and institutional role models.' (Zhao 1998: 27) It is selected on the criteria 'of its relevance to the central task of the Party and the government, and reported from the perspective of the Party.' The fact that it is not news, per say, was clear from the beginning, as a 1942 editorial in the *Liberation Daily* testifies to, 'We already know that our newspapers do not report the news; they are also sharp weapons in constructing and reforming our work and our lives.' (Zhao 1998: 26- 27)

Although significant private sector involvement is now allowed and practiced in China (Ma 2000:22), newspapers are still under state ownership and tutelage, and are still asked to be mouthpieces of the Party and its ideology (He 2003:198). Today, much of the news in China is still produced according to traditional Party news norms; there may be a slight difference in subject matter and rhetoric, but as a genre, Party news is still a prevalent institution. However, even a quick glance around a Chinese street vendor's assortment of glossy fashion magazines, sensational tabloids and intellectual journals will attest, new norms guiding news production have emerged and contend with Party oriented news.

4.2 Explaining emergence, modification and replacement of norms

Explaining how norms such as those that guide news production change is not simple. A helpful theoretical model, conceptualizing normative change, is proposed by theorist Piotr Sztompka. Normative change which can be the 'emergence, replacement or modification of the normative structure' can, according to Sztompka, take place through one of two alternative routes; it is brought about by either *evasion* from presiding norms or by an *innovation* which is disseminated and legitimated. Although a change of norms presupposes a deviation from the norm 'as a sort of prelude' (Sztompka 1993:253) it is not until

this deviation is granted a certain ‘degree of legitimacy, widespread acceptance or positive sanctioning’ that a *real* long lasting change in the normative structure might occur (ibid:253). His model, as this thesis hopes to show, can be a powerful tool in understanding and re-constructing changes in norms, such as the changes in norms guiding news production.

Sztompka’s ambition, to illustrate how *all* normative change takes place through a single model, means that his arguments are advanced at a high level of abstraction. Working through such a model allows a great deal of freedom, but also calls for a degree of independent interpretation in its application. In discussing and criticizing Sztompka I have tried to reduce the level of abstraction by means of examples which illustrate his concepts, and by using a simpler lexis; which is why I choose, for example, to talk about a norm’s change-path and not, what Sztompka terms *normative morphogenesis*. Sztompka’s model illustrates the emergence, replacement or modification, not just of individual norms but of ‘normative clusters, values, roles or institutional complexes’ (ibid:251). Sztompka’s more complex definition and distinction here is important, since this thesis does *not* argue that there is one norm guiding news production nor that change is uniform, however for the sake style and clarity, in discussing Sztompka’s theories, this thesis will discuss a *change in norms*.

Below there is a brief discussion of the two types of deviance central to Sztompka’s model, and an explanation of their alternative paths to normative change. Their resulting change-paths are outlined, followed by a wider discussion and critique.

4.3 Sztompka’s model of normative change

Normative change presupposes deviance from a norm. *Deviant* behavior is defined as new forms of behavior ‘*that depart from what is required either by cultural goals or by institutional norms or by both.*’ As such, *deviant* behavior is always behavior *outside* the range conduct which is institutionally prescribed or allowed (ibid:251).

Central, to Sztompka’s model is that there are two types of deviance, *nonconformance*, which is public, and *aberrance*, which is private (ibid:252). Whereas *nonconformers*, like political or religious dissidents, announce their dissent publicly and do not hide their departures from social norms; *aberrants*, criminals, for example, attempt to avoid the limelight of scrutiny. So, whereas *nonconforming* behavior involves the withdrawal of legitimacy from current norms, *aberrant* behavior - in contrast - acknowledges the legitimacy of norms violated. *aberrants* evade norms they find too demanding, but do not publicly question the legitimacy of these norms; the thief, for example, will certainly be ‘outraged if something is stolen from him’. (ibid:252)

According to Sztompka, not only are the two types of deviance different in kind; they also lead to completely different paths of normative change; while *nonconformists* change norms through *innovation*, *aberrants* change norms through their *evasion*. In both cases however, it is not enough that one actor deviates from the norm to change that norm, neither is the norm changed through the mere patterning of the *deviant* behavior in society. For a normative change to occur, the *deviance* must be given some wider acceptance or legitimacy in order to effect long-term societal change. (ibid:253 & 258)

4.4 Normative change through the evasion of norms

Normative change can take place through widespread institutionalized evasion of norms. However, some evasions of norms remain fully private or small-scale and do not initiate the process of normative change, (ibid:252) but through the more frequent occurrence of an evasion, or when it is undertaken by a plurality of individuals, it may become common in an ‘everybody does it’ spirit of norm evasion. Significantly, however, according to Sztompka’s theory of normative change, only when the widespread evasion is *institutionalized* - which is to say, it is granted a degree of legitimacy, widespread acceptance and even positive sanctioning - can a real, long term change in norms take place. (ibid:253)

Institutionalized norm evasion takes several different guises:

- **Norm erosion** – where the evaded norms are long established and constitute a tradition in the normative structure, but this is not in line with current realities.
- **Normative resistance** – when new, freshly introduced norms are enacted from above and depart from established rules of conduct. The newly imposed institutional demands are, in fact evaded, while slowly-changing norms and practices govern actual behavior
- **Norm substitution** – occurs when old norm remains in force but widespread evasion acquires tentative legitimacy through its sheer scale and by the long tradition of its occurrence

(ibid:254)

An institutionalized evasion of norms as outlined above may result in the final stage of the change-path: the introduction of new norms by authorities, or their attaining, by ‘evasion, the status of sanctioned norms, fully legitimized and embedded in the new normative structure’ (ibid:254).

This change-path through evasion - from the initial norm-evasion by an individual who finds the norm too demanding for them; through to patterned

evasion to widespread institutionalized evasion and later the evasion's full legitimization - is conceptualized as a closed cycle. This cycle will eventually 'open up for a new one as the new norms will eventually be evaded, at least by some members of society, and the process of formulating , replacing and modifying normative evasions will start to operate again.' (ibid:254)

The change-path through evasion, outlined above is undertaken through private aberrant behavior, and is different from the change-path of public nonconforming behavior. Instead of achieving normative change through evasion nonconformity achieves change through innovation.

4.5 Normative innovation

The second, alternative cycle through which a normative change can take place is through the accumulation of innovations. In the case of normative innovation, the actors question the validity of the norm itself. The norm is denied legitimacy, and rejective behavior is 'open, public and sometimes ostentatious'. Kicking off the process of normative change through innovation is a process termed '*rebellion*'. These '*rebellions*' are by definition exceptional. The path from rebellion to an actual acceptance and the replacement by new norms is substantial, but can be broken down in a number of steps illustrated in the diagram below. (ibid:255)

Initiation of change→**Filtering of change**→**Dissemination of change**→**Legitimation of change**
 ↳ private or public ↳ rejected or adopted ↳ compensated or amplified ↳

At each stage in the model there is full contingency: The innovation may be stopped in its tracks or continue along the change-path. The process may be stopped because it does not become public, or, when public, does not spread due to *filters* which act as gatekeepers or blocking mechanisms, which stop innovations from reaching a wider audience. Censors or editorial boards, for example, may act as gate keepers for news, and filter *innovations* (ibid:256).

Once the innovation succeeds in breaking through the various filters, the stage of *dissemination* can begin; this stage can produce varied results:

- **Compensation** – The initial change prompts negative feedbacks which diminish the significance of the normative change.
- **Overcompensation** – The resistance mobilized against the change is so strong that the structure changes in the opposite direction to that intended.

- **Insulation** – The initial innovation is limited to a specific area and does not evoke any further repercussions within society.
- **Dispersion** – The initial change ‘leads to a haphazard dispersion of a certain limited number of other components of the normative structure’ leaving a chaotic imprint on the existing normative structure, modifying it at various points, but keeping its structure intact.
- **Amplification** – The initial change triggers an operation of positive feedbacks, which leads to multiple changes in other components of the normative structure and in some cases the total transformation of the structure.

Crucially, normative innovation also needs to be legitimized by society to influence it in the long run. If normative structures lack legitimacy, they generate the ‘explosive potential for threat, dissent, contestation opposition and rebellion’ (ibid:258).

4.6 Limitations and possibilities of Sztompka’s model

Tracking an exact path of normative change through all the processes of filtering and dissemination would be difficult or perhaps impossible. By their very nature many normative innovations or evasions remain small-scale or are filtered out at an early stage. Furthermore, normative clusters such as news norms cannot be treated as an entity; parts of the structure may be evaded, modified or changed independent of one another. What Sztompka’s model does offer is toolbox of terminology and concepts which can help explain the processes of change in news production, a framework with which to start interpreting a complex arena of competition between norms set by the state, advertisers and the public as an audience.

There is reason to critique Sztompka’s hard and fast division between *public* and *private* deviation from norms which result in two independent change-paths. *Public* deviance, which he terms *nonconforming behavior*, is not only different in form, but also takes a different path of normative change, than a *private* form of deviance, which he terms *aberrant* behavior. However, I would argue that these divisions simplify what is a more complex situation. News production, for example, is by its very nature public, and yet those producing news that deviate from presiding norms, do so very seldom along the lines of Sztompka’s definition of *nonconforming* behavior defined as a public call for change. These public calls for change *do* happen in news production too. *The World Economic Herald*, a newspaper in Shanghai, for example publicly announced its sympathies with the students demonstrating for democracy during *Beijing Spring* of 1989. This

rebellious *nonconforming* behavior was rejected; *The World Economic Herald* was shut down. Evidence from China suggests that open, *nonconforming* behavior may trigger *overcompensation* when resistance against the normative innovation is so strong that ‘compensatory mechanisms overreact and spill over, not only preserving the status quo but ultimately changing the structure in the direction opposite to that intended (Sztompka 1993:256).’ This certainly happened after the spring of 1989, when open calls for change were followed by a period of Party news norms being reinstated to such a degree that some media researchers directly compared the early 1990s to that of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution (Zhao 1998: 48).

Much of the real changes in Chinese news norms, it is argued here, takes place along what Sztompka terms the private aberrant path to normative change; where a gradual erosion of Party news norms has, through a change-path, lead to their substitution by new norms. However, norms guiding the media in China are complex and transient. As Eric Kit-Wai Ma writes about the Chinese media:

‘Paths of change are murky and contingent. Journalists constantly test the boundaries of their organizations. Sometimes, directives from above are ignored and non-routines become routine, thus providing gaps and spaces for political and commercial exploitation and sometimes spaces for unconventional media contents. However, improvising activities are characterized by their transient nature and could be subjected to abrupt repressions and modifications.’

(Ma 2000:23)

Sztompka’s framework is liberating, in that it provides a great number of tools with which to conceptualize normative change, but also limiting, in that it makes such a strong distinction between types of deviance and their ways of producing change. Normative structures that guide news production are complex and prove that such distinctions are not easy; the lines between public and private, *aberrant* and *nonconforming* are blurred and so the concepts often intertwine. For this reason this thesis chooses to use Sztompka’s theories of normative change more as a conceptual framework than a rigid model.

5 Method

This thesis is structured around a content analysis of bird flu related news published during the fall of 2005 in three major Guangzhou daily newspapers. News articles in the three month sample are analyzed and compared to the 'Party news' genre, in an attempt to highlight the emergence of other news practices. Qualitative interviews with journalists and bloggers in greater China and previous media research have been used to interpret and contextualize the newspaper material.

5.1 Defining Party news norms

To define Party news norms I have compiled observations by Yuezhi Zhao from her book *Media, Market and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*. Though her observations are not proposed as a complete list by Zhao, when compiled, they provide a robust definition:

- Party news has an aim to mobilize people and sustain morale (Zhao 1998:26).
- Party news is often highly positive, didactic and value oriented (ibid 1998:27).
- Party news is selected on basis of its relevance to the central task of the Party and the government and reported from the perspective of the Party (ibid, 1998: 27).
- Party news is conclusive and comprehensive, especially when reporting on the work of the Party (ibid, 1998: 27).
- A typical Party news piece reports the publication of a government report rather than a story about an event. It is often about 'party and government policies, creative experiences, local adoptions to policies, and the achievements of individual and institutional role models' (ibid, 1998: 27).

- Criticisms, if there are any, are aimed at lower level cadres and bureaucracies for failing to carry out the Party's directives in an adequate way, for poor working style or for failing to live up to Party-standards (ibid, 1998: 30).

5.2 Identifying new norms

In order to identify some of the norms guiding contemporary news coverage in China, content from three different Guangzhou newspapers have been analyzed. All three newspapers belong to the best-selling newspapers in the Guangzhou; however each is an example of a distinct category of newspaper. The *Guangzhou Daily* (Guangzhou Ribao) is a municipal newspaper. The *Yangcheng Evening News* (Yanhgcheng Wanbao) is an evening newspaper, and the *Southern Metropolis Daily* (Nanfang Dushibao) is a metro-newspaper, each of them is owned by a separate media conglomerate.

Analyzing bird flu related articles provides an appropriate case-study since it is a news story which was covered by all three newspapers during the three month period. The subject matter itself provided easily defined boundaries to the analysis, while simultaneously generating a range of different types of news. As well as news of outbreaks and government prevention measures, economic and consumer issues were also brought the fore as a consequence of bird flu. Fowl, both domestic and wild, is common in Cantonese cooking, and poultry farming is an important source of livelihood and sustenance among Chinese rural residents, which is home to world's largest population of poultry

Naturally, the nature of a case-study limits how findings can be generalized. In this case, the Guangzhou press is one of China's most liberal media environments and the newspapers cater mainly to the urban population of one of China's richest cities. The press in Guangzhou is for these reasons not representative of the general media climate of China as whole. Moreover, the bird flu itself is a relatively sensitive story; in China reports of animal epidemics were only recently de-classified as a state secret, which influenced its coverage in the press. An analysis that keeps the context and environment which the material is produced in mind is nevertheless relevant and appropriate. Difference in news climate between different Chinese cities is often one of degree. Tendencies and processes in the content analyzed provide a starting point for broader discussions of the media in mainland China.

5.3 Material collection and analysis

Any newspaper article that contained news related to bird flu between September 1st and December 1st in the three newspapers, was summarized and translated. An effort was made to collect and analyze all articles published on the subject of the bird flu during this three month period. Although some articles may have been unintentionally missed out, the analyzed content represents the bulk of published articles on bird flu during this three months period. Making summaries was necessary due to the sheer numbers of articles looked at. I worked with these translated and summarized versions of the articles. These provided the advantage of overview, at the cost of some detail.

Working with translated material limits a detailed understanding of the contents of the article and meant that the analysis of news norms is also somewhat limited. Very few comments can be made about language for example, a central part of news coverage. The analysis is therefore limited to discussions of the topics covered and the reporting styles.

Qualitative interviews were also conducted with journalists, bloggers, and photojournalists working in greater China. These interviews were an important in interpreting the material. However, because a large number of my interviewees asked for confidentiality, and since these interviews often took place under informal conditions, I have chosen to use the interview material mainly as a background with which to analyze the newspaper material and where possible found secondary sources published sources which express views similar to my interviewees.

6 Content analysis of bird flu reporting in the Guangzhou press

The bird flu coverage in the three Guangzhou daily newspapers included in the study (the *Guangzhou Daily*, the *Yangcheng Evening News* and the *Southern Metropolis Daily*) is outlined and discussed below. While many articles analyzed are clear examples of Party news and report positively on government-led initiatives to prevent bird flu, other reports do not easily fit into such a genre. Negative stories, such as articles describing the threat posed by bird flu to society, features on consumer concerns, editorials, infotainment and investigative reports were all found in the three months of coverage analyzed.

A number of strategies were employed by the newspapers to make news more entertaining, and even staid Party news-type stories were often livened up through the use of engaging page layout and catchy headlines. With a few notable exceptions, critical reporting of government policy is absent in the sample, and in many cases reporting of outbreaks is coupled with descriptions of the ‘comprehensive’ government measures being taken to counter the spread of bird flu.

6.1 Party news

A large portion of the bird flu coverage in the three daily newspapers fits comfortably into the Party news genre. It publicizes primarily the results of meetings aimed at preventing bird flu; the issuing of new policy directives from the government; positive reports on bird flu prevention measures; or government-issued imperatives to mobilize prevention work. These types of articles often consist of slightly re-written Xinhua reports, but also include coverage from various provincial or municipal level agencies, explaining how national policies are implemented locally. The headline, placement, and length of the reports differ between the three newspapers, but the message is largely uniform.

On September 11th, for example, all three daily newspapers printed a Xinhua report on the enactment of *China’s Preparation and Emergency Plan for Flu Epidemics*. However, each newspaper deals with the report slightly differently. In the *Guangzhou Daily* it makes front-page news under the headline ‘*China enacting plan to cope with flu epidemic*’, whereas in the *Yangcheng Evening News* it is couched in a cluster of three bird flu articles on page A2, presented under the bolder and more aggressive headline, ‘*Facing a bird flu pandemic*’. In the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, however, the announcement of the report is relegated

to page A16 under the title, *'Ministry of Health to sternly prevent flu pandemic'*. In all three papers, the report includes the information that Yang Weizhong, a director at the Chinese CDC, announced an emergency plan to cope with bird flu epidemic, including a four-level scale of emergency. The coverage goes on to praise China's role in international prevention measures. In the *Yangcheng Evening News's* report, one can read that, 'China's inspection of influenza has contributed greatly to world flu prevention.'

Another set of articles which exemplify Party news coverage are reports covering Guangzhou's Vice Governor Lei Yulan visit to the Guangdong Health Department, where he discussed with CDC-experts which measures should be adopted to prevent the spread of influenza and bird flu. In the *Guangzhou Daily* the report is headlined, *'Strengthening prevention and controlling capacity against flu and bird flu'*. The report is highly didactic. Similar articles are published on October 21st on the meeting between Vice Premier Hui Liangyu and the State Council on bird flu prevention. 'He pointed out that the current season was critical for bird flu outbreak, and a complete emergency system needs to be established around the country' [*paraphrased*]. The meeting arrived at five important measures pertaining to bird flu prevention, and, in the *Yangcheng Evening News*, the story was headlined, *'Five measures to prevent bird flu'*.

Officials achieving a specific number of bird flu prevention measures was an overriding theme in the resultant reporting from these 'meeting-type' stories. On November 5th, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* described the result of a meeting hosted by the Mayor of Shenzhen which 'concluded the previous efforts of controlling bird flu and made plans for the next steps'. During the meeting, the Mayor pointed out six principles to guide the future of bird flu prevention and control. Similarly, a meeting hosted by Premier Wen Jiabao, reported on November 11th, ends in twelve measures, including a 2 billion RMB national budget for bird flu prevention and control, and the establishment of a national bird flu prevention headquarters.⁴

There are, as illustrated above, a substantial number of articles that fall well within even a narrow definition of Party news. Not all will be listed here, but some illustrating examples of headlines include: *'Zhanjiang city takes "Five no leaving out" measures to prevent bird flu'*⁵; *'Shenzhen has bird flu prevention teachers'*⁶; *'Residents of Nanxing village get free health check'*⁷; *'National bird flu prevention headquarter established'*⁸; and *'16 provinces begin sample tests of poultry and disinfecting gear'*⁹

⁴ This highly ritualistic manner of reporting meetings is even applied to international conferences. In an article in the *Guangzhou Daily* about the 3-day Geneva Conference on bird flu in November the results of the meeting are described as a plan which guides the international battle against bird flu, including 'five specific aspects'.

⁵ Article headline in the *Guangzhou Daily* on the 31st of October 2005

⁶ Article headline in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* on November 4th 2005

⁷ Article headline in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* on November 9th 2005

⁸ Article headline in the *Yangcheng Evening News* on November 11th 2005

⁹ Article headline in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* on November 14th 2005

6.2 Negative news: news of outbreaks and bird flu epidemic threats

Reporting negative news stories such as the outbreaks of disease are significant in that they break with *Party news* norms which tend emphasize Party achievements. Though outbreaks of bird flu were publicized, reports of outbreaks in China and overseas found in the sample were based almost entirely on Xinhua¹⁰ material, and national reports of outbreaks were often delayed. Xinhua articles in the three month sample, all downplayed the importance of the bird flu outbreaks through emphasising government efforts to contain the disease. A significant exception to the Xinhua reporting was found in the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, which independently produced long special-features on the outbreak in Heishan county in Liaoning province.¹¹ These reports draw on interviews with villagers and local government officials, as the village goes about the painful task of killing 6 million chickens in one day to stop the spread of the disease.

In September, there were some Xinhua reports from Indonesia, which was dealing with a bird flu outbreak. By October, the virus had appeared in Turkey, and all three newspapers included Xinhua reports covering the Turkish government's efforts to combat the outbreak there, as well as Europe's growing bird flu panic. In the Xinhua-based articles, there was a tendency to make the news of outbreaks conclusive, both overseas and nationally; Turkish and Indonesian authorities were, for example, both described as taking comprehensive measures to combat the outbreaks. In the material analyzed, only the preparations of African countries were found significantly wanting.¹²

Beginning mid-October 2005, reports of national outbreaks of bird flu began to trickle in. In all, 25 such outbreaks were reported in China during the last few months of the year (www.who.org). The outbreaks were usually reported through Xinhua and these reports stressed the 'comprehensive measures' being taken to combat the disease's spread. Bird flu found in a large number of poultry in the provincial capital of Inner Mongolia on October 20th, for example, is treated with

¹⁰ Xinhua or 'New China News Agency,' is the official press agency of the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the biggest center for collecting information and press conferences in the PRC. It is one of the two news agencies in the PRC, the other being the China News Service' source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xinhua_News_Agency

¹¹ The *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*), a popular weekend edition of the *Southern Daily* (*Nanfang Ribao*) - a daily Guangzhou newspaper which is *not* included in this study, also published their own reporting with an analysis of the ongoing outbreaks of bird flu in Vietnam during September and October 2005.

¹² In a Xinhua-based article from *Guangzhou Daily* October 25th African countries are described as having done very little to prepare for an eventual outbreak, Europe, the piece went on to say, might export its diseased chickens to Africa, which puts the continent at significant risk.

a small, almost identical text in all three papers, which briefly outlines that there had been an outbreak in the region but that, ‘relevant measures such as vaccination, quarantine, poultry killing and disinfection were immediately taken and the current situation is under control.’ Similarly on November 5th a Xinhua report in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* reports the death of 8940 chickens in Heishan, Liaoning. The article outlines briefly that the area is quarantined, so as to limit the spread of the disease in Heishan county, and that ‘the effort is so far effective’. Another Xinhua-based article in the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, on the 10th of November, concludes that immediate measures are being taken in those areas to prevent the disease from spreading.

These Xinhua reports of the outbreaks in China were delayed, according to an article criticizing the Chinese government’s handling of the bird flu in *Caijing* - a respected Beijing-based business magazine. *Ceiling* reported for example that *The World Organization of Animal Health* (OIE) had already been briefed on October 24th about infections in Anhui and Hunan; however the news ran, at first, only in the *Farmer’s Daily*, a special interest newspaper, that few in China read. According to *Caijing*, only after a Foreign Ministry spokesman and a Hong Kong government Web site confirmed the infections, and the foreign media reported the news, did the official Xinhua News Agency publish its reports which were then published Chinese newspapers (*Caijing Magazine* as cited on China Digital Times <http://chinadigitaltimes.net>).

The *Southern Metropolis Daily’s* own reporting from the outbreak in the county of Heishan provides a sharp contrast to the Xinhua reports. Whereas Xinhua reporting emphasized the effective efforts used to remedy the situation, the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, in two articles looked at, provided a completely different, in-depth and nuanced description of the problems faced by the residents of Heishan County.

One article headlined ‘*Heishan facing battle of killing 6 million chickens in one day*’ describes the difficulties faced by villagers set to undertake this task themselves after the use of hired workers proved ineffective. The article goes on to describe that the culling was undertaken with little physical protection, posing significant risk to the workers. The latter report published by the *Southern Metropolis Daily* about Heishan is a massive spread extending over several pages, headlined the ‘*Pain of Killing 6 Million Chicken in Heishan*’ which describes the dark mood in Heishan after the confirmed outbreak of bird flu. The article goes on to explain the situation and atmosphere in the quarantined area, where poultry has been the primary source of income for almost every household. The article includes interviews with farmers about how the disease was first discovered in the village, and how they went about the culling task set by the government. In the article, local government officials express their regret and worry because the local government’s budget is too small to afford compensation, and central funding is needed.

There is a sharp contrast in narrative between Xinhua-produced reports and the *Southern Metropolis Daily’s* own reporting of the situation in Heishan. Whereas Xinhua reports adopt *Party news* norms of describing government efforts as effective and so end in a resoundingly positive note, the *Southern Metropolis*

Daily's articles are open-ended and critical; they detail safety risks posed to workers and the psychological and economic set-backs facing a village which has just lost its source of income. In a strong deviation from Party news norms, the article expresses not the views of the Party-state, but the grievances of villagers, and of local officials.

6.2.1 Threat news

Another significant type of news in the three month sample analysed was news about the risk posed by bird flu to society. Although this news is reported, such articles do not take a prominent position in the newspapers looked at. For example, on September 19th a Xinhua report on the WHO's prediction at the time, that millions might die in an eventual pandemic is re-printed under the headline, '*A bird flu outbreak may lead to millions of deaths*'. However, despite the sensational title and contents - which goes on to explain that the bird flu might plunge the world into a deep economic crisis, the *Yangcheng Evening News* placed its version on page A16 and in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* it was afforded a small article on page A21. There were a number of articles with similar dire warnings; on September 20th the *Southern Metropolis Daily* headlines a story, '*Bird flu might lead to human outbreak*', on September 21st a report is headlined, '*Bird flu is severer than SARS - the whole world is short of vaccine*'.¹³ These reports describe a global, general threat but discussions about specific areas in China that that might be especially at risk or larger structural problems, underlined by international media covering China at the time is absent. By mid-November, predictions of a worldwide pandemic were being contested by bodies such as the OIE and the global flurry of reports predicting disaster subsided.¹⁴

¹³ Article headline in the Southern Metropolis Daily on the 21st of September

¹⁴ An interesting addition to these 'threat news' items were that two newspapers published articles where doctor Zhong Nanshan, gave his personal risk assessments of the bird flu situation. Dr. Zhong Nanshan became a house-hold name in China after publicizing the SARS epidemic in 2003, which started in Guangzhou. He is called on in the articles to comment on the risks posed by bird flu, once in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* in a report headlined, 'Zhong Nanshan: a warm winter might push back the outbreak of bird flu', and once on November 8th in the *Yangcheng Evening News*.

6.3 Consumer news, economics and infotainment

All three newspapers published articles detailing consumer concerns, and reported on economic problems caused by the bird flu outbreak.¹⁵ Such articles often have a different style to those which focus on Party achievements. In consumer stories several angles are sometimes analysed and a range of sources are interviewed, the journalists being given leeway to do their own investigations. An illustrating example from an article on the November 3rd is a report headlined '*Fennel can prevent bird flu*' in the *Southern Metropolis Daily*. It refers to international sources which describe Chinese fennel, in China used as a common spice, as 'the only medicine in the world that can resist the bird flu virus.' Guangzhou citizens are in the article quoted as being unaware of this discovery. The price of fennel is steady the report says, and adds comments of practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine on the new discovery. In this article, several sources are quoted and knowledge is double-checked with the 'man on the street'. Even when the sources interviewed did not turn up anything concrete, the act of reporting; asking questions, checking facts, has news value in itself in this case.

Sometimes consumer reports are clearly prioritized over Party news articles. For example, November 2nd the *Yangcheng Evening News*, a typical Party item - that *China's Preparation and Emergency Plan for Flu Epidemic* has been released on the official website of the Ministry of Agriculture - is a side-bar in a cluster of other bird flu news, and overshadowed by a consumer piece headlined, '*No bird flu insurance in Guangdong*'. The accompanying article explains that bird flu insurance, an insurance product on offer in Shanghai and Chengdu, is not available in Guangzhou, despite the fact that similar insurance policies were on offer during the SARS period. Accompanying the medley of bird flu news, is a picture of a girl selling stuffed chickens on the street, with an accompanying, but unrelated caption, which relates a conversation between a pineapple chicken vendor and her customers, overheard by the newspaper's reporter. This example is telling, in that here the Party-piece has been integrated into but is clearly overshadowed by other narratives, including a street anecdote and a consumer piece.

¹⁵ All consumer news articles in the sample was published in November when bird flu news had taken on a more local dimension due to the large number of bird flu outbreaks across China.

6.3.1 Infotainment

All three newspapers published articles with a blend of science and advice; often these articles are elaborately laid-out with pictures, graphs and collages. For example, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* devoted a whole two-page spread to infotainment news about bird flu, on November 3rd. The *Yangcheng Evening News* on November 8th writes an article headlined - '*ABC common knowledge on prevention of bird flu in humans.*' Similar articles are published in the *Guangzhou Daily* on November 12th under the main headline, '*We can tackle bird flu*' with side-bar articles with headlines such as, '*What does H5N1 look like?*' '*How do chickens and ducks infect humans?*' and '*Scientists reveal how bird flu spreads and varies*', the articles are clustered around a world map of bird flu outbreaks.

6.4 Investigative reporting and editorials

Starting in November, there were a number of articles which drew on independent reporting and investigation from the newspapers themselves. The investigative nature of a report is often underlined in the text, through the use of phrases such as 'according to the newspapers own investigation' - clearly independent investigations are a marketable quality. As such, investigative reports is given a wide definition, stretching from innocuous investigations of a journalist going to restaurants to see if chicken dishes still sell well, as the *Southern Metropolis Daily* did, on November 6th in an report headlined - '*Chicken in a "dry pot" no longer popular in restaurants*', to an investigation into an illegal wild bird market in Guangzhou by the *Guangzhou Daily*.¹⁶

Some of these investigations voice concerns of business owners and local residents. For example, in an investigative report by the *Yangcheng Evening News* on the 8th of November, the newspapers went to local towns in a locality called Zhanjiang, where wild birds are a well-known delicacy. The reporters conducted interviews with those selling migratory birds and restaurants which served dishes containing such birds. The report went on to say that local residents were worried due to the general decrease in the numbers of migratory birds, and that their line of business might bring bird flu.

Criticism, voiced in the reports, is sometimes made but it is often indirect. The *Southern Metropolis Daily* for example reports on the restaurant owners'

¹⁶ The categories in which material is analyzed in this thesis sometimes overlap. Articles described previously have drawn on investigations by the newspapers, some consumer and economic news, outlined in section 6.3 and the *Southern Metropolis Daily's* reports from the outbreak in Heishan could also fall into the category.

complaints that the new government prohibitions on poultry sales outside markets are difficult to carry out, and the trade is going on despite the Guangzhou Health Department's prohibitions. In a more far-reaching investigation, a reporter from the *Guangzhou Daily* pretends to be a customer, and visits a frozen food market, which during the mornings functions as a black-market for wild animals. He finds that there are dozens of different types of wild birds, many listed as protected species, which are killed wherever it is convenient, their 'dead body, blood and feathers scattered everywhere [*paraphrased*].' In a sharp contrast to Xinhua-produced photos prevalent in newspapers during the three month period, where bird handlers generally wear gloves and boiler suits, photos accompanying the *Guangzhou Daily* story show a seller grabbing a crane with his bare hands. The report is followed up with a telephone interview to the owner of the market, who flatly denies that any such practice takes place.

6.4.1 Editorials

As illustrated in the discussion of Party news in section 6.1, news and editorial content are often difficult to separate in Chinese newspapers. However, two editorials analysed in the material stand out in that they voice personal viewpoints of the columnist and do not merely echo the Party-line. One is from the *Guangzhou Daily* and the other from the *Southern Metropolis Daily*. The *Guangzhou Daily* columnist worries about the ignorance and indifference of her parents who live in the countryside. The author emphasizes the need to raise the awareness about bird flu starting at the level of the individual. On November 3rd in the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a columnist writes about how Europe is tackling the bird flu and holds the actions of European governments' as examples. Europe's early reporting system, and government transparency the author writes, did not confuse the residents of these countries, it calmed them down. The writer explains that the governments in Europe shows a 'humanitarian concern' for the public by storing large amounts of vaccine and by making bird flu prevention a long term policy. These measures have made Europe an example for Asian countries, suffering from more severe bird flu outbreaks.

7 Discussion of emerging news norms in the Chinese press

7.1 Evading Party news norms

Party news in China, where news is reported from the perspective of the Party and chosen due to its relevance to the tasks of the Party, is still a prevalent institution in China. This is exemplified by the large number of articles in the sample detailing policy directives of the government; meetings between officials held to publicize bird flu prevention; and imperatives aimed at mobilizing prevention initiatives.

Party news norms, however, do not permeate all news coverage. They are evaded, partially along the lines of what Sztompka terms, norm erosion where the long established norms are 'no longer congruent with current realities'. The *Yancheng Evening News* for example, often divides up its Party news pieces into more palatable article-clusters with catchier headlines, and the *Southern Metropolis Daily* usually prioritizes other types of news, while condensing or burying Party news stories. The emphasis is instead frequently placed on softer news stories such as consumer segments and infotainment coverage. The tendency in these newspapers is often to tone down Party news stories - which are not a marketable product.

Interestingly, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* itself - as an institution - may be seen as an evasion from Party news norms, it was set up by the Southern Media Group, one of China's early media conglomerates, whose flagship paper, the *South Daily*, has a more defined role as a government mouthpiece. The *Southern Metropolis Daily* presents an opportunity to cater to a young urban population, through extensive special-features and consumer and infotainment sections. Content which is more relevant to people's lives, and therefore more marketable - without sacrificing the flagship paper's role as a forum for Party policy. This type of evasion of Party-imposed norms in China can be legitimated by media management on economic grounds. Newspapers are expected to make a profit. Although Communism in China now exists primarily as a 'ritualized rhetoric that is vague, abstract and ambiguous' (He, 2003:199) to the point where even liberal ideas are couched in Marxist terminology, (He 2003:201) selling Communist rhetoric in China is a 'doomed business practice' (He, 2003:202). On the other hand, there is significant profit to be made from the Chinese media industry by

choosing material interesting to the Chinese audience; in the 1990's, the media had an annual growth rate of 35 percent - a more profitable investment than tobacco (Yu, 2002 quoted in Lee et al, 2003:583).

The appetite for news relevant to Chinese audiences is driving the expansion of available discussion topics in the Chinese press and giving rise to more permissive press policy rules. This process of evasion of Party news norms is being spurred on by the Internet, which has opened a venue where news can be discussed outside the rigid filtering mechanisms imposed on the mass media. Many Chinese journalists have started personal blogs and these are used to re-print stories and provide a more far-reaching forum for comments and discussions.

Despite the rapid commercialization of the Chinese media, newspapers are still in administrative terms regarded as political units and bestowed with the 'undeniable political mission - serving as the Party-states voice to promote its interest, policies and ideology' (He 2003:201). Although media conglomerates have given rise to the increased diversification of information through branding of newspapers which cater to different audiences, as Eric Kit-Wai Ma points out, they also produce the potential for more centralized control over the media market, 'authority tolerates these conglomerates because they can serve as means to control chaotic free competition and limit the proliferation of minor papers' (Ma 2000:22). And conglomerates in turn may still rely on the state to protect their interests as the Chinese media market opens wider to international competition under the arrangements of the WTO. The relationship between the existing media institutions and the Party-state is often not combative but dialectical.

7.2 Normative innovation: negative news

There were significant numbers of negative news stories in the three month sample of bird flu coverage analyzed. Articles detailing bird flu outbreaks; the coverage of reports from WHO and various scientific teams outlining the threat caused by bird flu; and articles voicing bird flu fears of consumers and business owners, for example, testify to the fact that negative news now has significant news value in China.

As in other Communist countries, negative news, did not previously feature in Chinese newspapers, which emphasized that news should be positive and aimed at sustaining morale (Zhao 1998:26-27). The first bus accident ever reported in China, for example, was publicized in 1979, in a short article in the *Liberation Daily*. 'Before the *Liberation Daily* published the story of the 26 bus in Shanghai there had been no bus accidents' in China (de Burgh, 2003: 41). Using Sztompka's framework; the reporting of negative news can be considered a *normative innovation*. However, as evidenced in the material analyzed,

contemporary news norms - which allow the publication of negative news - have *not* completely substituted older Party news norms which underline that news should be positive and conclusive. Xinhua reports from the bird flu outbreak areas are a clear example; the articles stress the ‘comprehensive measures’ being taken to contain outbreaks; a completely different picture to the narrative in the *Southern Metropolis Daily’s* own reports from the bird flu outbreak in Heishan, Liaoning which details safety risks posed to workers, psychological and the economic set-backs facing an entire community.

7.3 Critical news coverage: evasion and innovation

Investigative reports and watchdog-type journalism is extremely popular with Chinese audiences. When *Focal Point*, a popular current affairs segment on China Central Television (CCTV), produces investigative or critical features ratings can be as high as 70% of the Chinese an estimated TV audience, of over 900 million viewers (De burgh, 40: 2003). Within the group of three papers analyzed in this thesis, especially the *Southern Metropolis Daily* has built a strong national reputation on the back of its investigative reporting. Much of this reporting has been done outside Guangzhou where there is less risk of being held accountable to the shamed authorities. The practice is termed *yidi baodao* - or reports from non-local places. During the spring of 2005, a document from Chinese government authorities was promulgated forbidding this practice (The Economist, Aug. 20th 2005). However, as the *Southern Metropolis Daily’s* coverage from the outbreak in Heishan attests, government regulations are sometimes flouted.¹⁷

Investigative journalism is clearly an innovation of news norms. The role played by this new breed of ‘investigative’ reporting however is contested. Media scholar Yuezhi Zhao (2004) contends that investigative journalism in China promotes the interests of the Party-state: by claiming ‘to speak for the “people” while defusing intensified social tension by selectively incorporating the voices of particular disenfranchised groups.’ (Zhao, 2004:44) Using Zhao’s interpretation, the normative structure, in this case Party news norms, may be upheld by innovations such as the introduction of more independent or investigative journalism. In other words, the new institutionalized patterns of behavior may be ‘more adaptive than the old in the realization of primary goals.’ (Merton 1968 in Sztompka 1993:257) Zhao’s argumentation can be supported by the content analyzed. As evidenced in the material collected, investigative-type reporting in the sample was used primarily to investigate issues that do not oppose or criticize

¹⁷ The *South Weekend*, a Guangzhou based weekly magazine, has long been threatened with closure for its investigative reports, however the magazine is popular at newsstands across over China, and receives protection from provincial authorities (Zhao, 1998: 134).

government practice including the many reports which focus on consumer issues or the Guangzhou Daily's investigation of an illegal wild animal market. However, to dismiss the investigative journalism in China as directly representing the interests of the Party-state would be flippant. Journalists I interviewed in Guangzhou underlined the importance of consumer issues which they saw as protecting the interests of their audiences by exposing the commercial malpractice. Similarly, investigative reports were held up as the most important type of newspaper journalism, it brought about real change, according to one interviewee, despite its limited scope.

In China, as elsewhere, it is not always the central government policy which limits investigative or critical reporting, but vested local interests fearful of damaging information. This is especially true of disease reporting which can cause significant economic loss or social unrest if reported. Outbreaks are sometimes covered up locally for these reasons. Since China's political power is increasingly being decentralized, local policy may take precedence over that of central authorities, where local policy may be more restrictive what is permitted and condoned in Beijing. This is true also of Guangzhou. Despite being one of China's most liberal media environments, news of provincial efforts to combat bird flu in the sample were often almost identical in the three newspapers and the coverage adhered to Party news norms emphasizing positive, conclusive reporting stressing that relevant and comprehensive measures being taken by the provincial government.

8 Conclusions

In China, the previously dominant Party news genre in which news is reported from the perspective of the Party and chosen on the grounds of its relevance to the tasks of the Party, has giving way to more marketable news practices. This analysis of bird flu coverage in the Guangzhou press gives a snapshot of news practice in China's newly commercialized press sector.

This case-study, which analyzes the of bird flu coverage in three popular daily newspapers (the *Guangzhou Daily*, the *Yangcheng Evening News* and the *Southern Metropolis Daily*), from the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou during the fall of 2005, shows that news norms in China have changed significantly since the market-based reforms were introduced on a large scale in the 1990's, and a number of emerging news practices were identified. However, a large portion of the bird flu coverage in the three daily newspapers still fits comfortably into the previously dominant Party news genre, as evidenced by the many articles publicizing the results of meetings aimed at preventing bird flu; the issuing of new policy directives from the government; positive reports on bird flu prevention measures; or government-issued imperatives to mobilize prevention work.

The inclusion of negative news, such as news of bird flu outbreaks or the threats caused by bird flu; consumer and economic features, infotainment and investigative journalism in the sample shows that news coverage in China has changed dramatically. However, these emergent news types were often couched in Party news discourses or narrative techniques, which convey news values such as a positive, conclusive message. News of national bird flu outbreaks, for example were often delayed, and when reported, the Xinhua coverage stressed comprehensive measures which were being taken to contain outbreaks.

Significantly, however Party news-type stories no longer permeate all news coverage in China. The analysis shows that Party news norms are often evaded. The *Yancheng Evening News* for example, divides up its Party news pieces into more palatable article-clusters with catchier headlines, and the *Southern Metropolis Daily* usually prioritizes other types of news, while condensing or burying Party news stories. The emphasis is instead placed on softer news stories such as consumer segments and infotainment coverage. The tendency in the three newspapers was to tone down Party news stories - which are difficult to sell. Other reporting, including the *Southern Metropolis Daily's* spread on the bird flu outbreak in Heishan, Liaoning, discussed the content analysis, paint a completely different picture to that presented in Party news narrative. Whereas Xinhua reports emphasized the government-led efforts to combat bird flu in the area, the *Southern Metropolis Daily's* own reports from Heishan detail safety risks posed to workers, psychological and the economic set-backs facing an entire community as it goes about the task of culling 6 million of its chickens.

Overall, this thesis argues that normative change has resulted in a wider range of topics covered in the China and slowly forward-shifting lines in the sand in the breadth and wealth of subjects that may be dealt with and commented on independently by the Chinese press. However, as Eric Kit-Wai Ma (2000), points out in his analysis of the Chinese media; paths to change in China are murky and contingent. Change is transient in nature and subject to abrupt repressions and modifications (Ma 2000:23).

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