

## **Newspapers are Dead? A Case Study on Chinese Newspapers’ Public Opinion Guidance in the Context of New Media<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

With social media booming, newspapers are facing an enormous challenge, and some have even had to exit the market. Likewise, their role as a main force of public opinion guidance in China has also been challenged. They have lost their vantage ground. The present study conducted a case study on one well-known Chinese online public opinion event. Through analyzing the newspapers’ role played in different public opinion development stages, this study displayed how Chinese newspapers worked together and successfully guided online public opinion in that case. The newspapers’ advantages in guiding public opinion and suggestions as to how newspapers can survive and guide public opinion in the new media era are put forward in the final section.

*Keywords:* newspaper, public opinion guidance, China, case study, Shandong murder case

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As information technology develops and evolves rapidly, the global media landscape has undergone a huge change. New media, exemplified by social media, has already changed online information communication patterns. Traditional newspapers, which were one of main forces of public opinion guidance in China, are encountering unprecedented challenges. There once was only one unified public opinion field in the country, but now the official opinion field and folk opinion field are co-existing. Chinese newspapers are in the progress of reforming and transforming, some of them have not been able to survive. Can they still play a critical role in leading public opinion in the context of new media as they did before? The present study displays how Chinese newspapers successfully guided online public opinion in one case and attempts to make a summary about how they did it and what can be learned.

### **China's Current Media Landscape**

According to *The 44<sup>th</sup> Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet Network* released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2019) on August 30, 2019, as of June 2019, the population of Internet users in China has reached 854 million, and 99.1% of them have an access to the Internet via mobile phones. The population of online news consumers has reached 675 million, including 81.4% of the Internet user population. Online news services in China have developed substantially. As of December 31, 2018, 761 Internet news information service units have been approved by the government in China, including news sites, applications, forums, blogs, microblogs, public accounts of WeChat, live webcasts, and others. These online news service units have changed Chinese people's news consumption habits and have become important channels for them to access news facts and express their opinions.

### **Current Newspaper Media Development Situation**

Currently, newspapers are confronting an unprecedented crisis of survival and growth. Their subscription rates have declined sharply. There are some consequences:

- 1) publication discontinuing. In China in 2017, 16 press newspapers

discontinued publication and in 2018 another 45 (Banxi shuyuan, 2018);

2) scale shrinking. For instance, when Shanghai United Media Group (SUMG) was founded in 2013, it had 32 affiliated newspapers. In 2018, only 21 newspapers and magazines were part of the operation;

3) transition and digitalization. Overall the digitalization process of Chinese newspapers began in 2006, when *National Newspaper Publishing Industry Eleventh Five-Year Development Outline* was announced by the Chinese government. Digitalization was realized in the aspects of content, carrier form, and procedure. Starting with establishing newspaper websites or portals, all newspapers launched their Wechat/Weibo public accounts and applications. However, after the accomplishment of digitalization, the problem of how to compete with numerous social media and emerging news applications lingers.

Besides, social media bears characteristics such as immediacy, strong interaction, convenience, and low threshold, which have enabled the spread of news at an unprecedentedly quick speed, and more individuals construct and disseminate information based on their demands. The folk opinion field has formed on the Internet. Opinion guidance refers to the practical agenda setting activity conducted by certain political parties, organizations, groups, and individuals, in order to guide the public to form correct public interest consensus, social beliefs, social emotions, and social values (Liu, 2014). The guidance of network public opinion is a dynamic process that makes the attitude of network public change to the correct direction of network public opinion (Liu & Wang, 2019). Can newspapers play its due role in the flood of network public opinion? How can they improve their online public opinion guidance ability?

## Literature Review

### “Newspaper” in New Media Age

With the development of communication technology, more and more audiences have hoped to obtain high-quality news without limitations of time and place. Portable, mobile, interactive, and personalized terminals were demanded. Taking the form of mobile carrier is an inevitable choice for the traditional newspaper industry in the

period of transition (Li & Liu, 2013). Currently, the carriers of content are not limited to paper but have expanded to computers, smartphones, and other devices. So, can newspapers still be referred to as “newspaper”? Gao (2010) deems that newspapers should not be literally considered as “papers” but a sort of display device and storage medium, like computers and cellphones; likewise, newspapers should be deemed as the producer of news content. Digitalization has resulted in a series of changes with information collecting, editing, and delivering, as well as operation and profit mode. “Traditional” newspapers have evolved into a new stage. But they are still traditional media because they take advertising as their main profit mode (Luan, 2015). All the newspapers in the present study are considered “traditional media,” but these sources include both print and digital forms.

### **Traditional Media and Online Public Opinion**

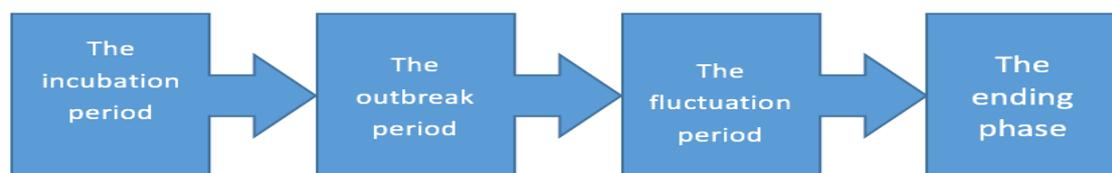
Due to the rapid growth of Internet users and development of communication technology, information is produced and delivered very rapidly. Scholars have argued that unexpected events have become important triggers of network public opinion. However, in terms of emergent coverage, traditional media may have difficulties. Report lagging raises serious challenges (Feng, 2010; 2015; Xu, 2019). In the past, public opinion was dominated by traditional media, which could be challenged by active grassroots users due to the booming of We-Media (Yang, 2019; Wei, 2018). On the contrary, some Chinese scholars insist that online public opinion is still dominated by traditional media in China. For instance, the famous Chinese journalism professor Li Liangrong from Fudan University emphasized that traditional media should not be despised, “the main field of the current public opinion is on the Internet, but the online public opinion is still dominated by the traditional media; the traditional media has irreplaceable supporting role in advocating mainstream values; at critical moments, traditional media plays a critical role” (Li, 2015). These scholars suggested that traditional media take the responsibility to set the public agenda and guide the network public opinion in a positive direction (e.g., Fan, 2010; Dang, 2012). In addition, traditional media should play a leading role due to high credibility, scientific and complete news producing procedures, in-depth reporting ability (Dang, 2012), authority, professional personnel, and priority of important news releasing (Sun &

Tian, 2018). The present study examined the process of how Chinese newspapers successfully guided online public opinion in one case that was very influential and famous in China and attempted to make a summary of the advantages and challenges of Chinese newspapers as well as some suggestions on how to better guide public opinion online.

The case study was unfolded on the basis of a public opinion development stages frame. In the developmental stages of online public opinion, there are mainly four types of divisions: breakout, proliferation, decaying stage (e.g., Li & Xing, 2017); initial formation, proliferation, outbreak, ending stage (e.g., Yi, 2012); incubation, initial formation, rapid developing, mature, decaying (e.g., Lin et al., 2020) as well as the type of non-evident differences between stages (e.g., Liu, 2012). The developmental stage frame is not fixed; each single case may present unique features (Liu, 2014). Based on the above discussion, combining the developmental characteristics of the study case, the frame of the incubation period, the outbreak period, peak, public opinion fluctuation period, and ending phase was adopted.

**Figure 1.**

*The Analysis Frame and Process*



## Methodology

### Case Study

In doing case study research, the "case" being studied may be an individual, an organization, an event, or an action, existing in a specific time and place (Qiu, 2018). The case studied in the present study is one of the most influential legal cases and online public opinion events in China, the "Shandong Murder Case" (SMC). During the process, newspapers played an irreplaceable role in triggering attention and discussion among netizens that eventually changed the judiciary result. The materials

analyzed are the online coverage of the SMC by newspapers from March 23 to June 23, 2017. The analysis focuses on how the agenda of “legal justice” was set.

### **Brief Introduction of the “SMC”**

On April 14, 2016, around 10 debt collectors came to a private company located in the city of Liaocheng in the province of Shandong owned by Su Yinxia to collect debts. Su’s son, Yu Huan, was also present. Su and Yu were confined in a room. One debt collector took off his pants and insulted Su with his private parts in front of Yu. The son witnessed his mother suffering unbearable humiliation, including slapping and sexual harassment for more than an hour. Eventually, he fought back with a paring knife and injured four gangsters, and one of them, Du Zhihao, died in the hospital. Yu was arrested. On February 17, 2017, the Liaocheng intermediate people's court of Shandong province convicted Yu of the crime and sentenced him to life imprisonment. On March 23, *Southern Weekly*<sup>3</sup> published a report titled "Stabbing the Man Who Insulted My Mother" on its website and on its WeChat public account two days later, which made the case rapidly conveyed on Chinese social media and became the most attention-catching legal case. Afterwards, many other newspapers engaged effort in reporting this case. Public opinion was formed as well as guided by their reporting. “Fairness of judgment” was set as the public agenda. On June 23, the Shandong higher people's court re-examined the case and announced Yu’s legitimate self-defense. His sentence was changed from life imprisonment to 5 years in prison.

## **Analysis**

### **The Incubation Period: Started with Eye-Catching Content**

On March 23, 2017, an article titled "Stabbing the Man Who Insulted My Mother" was published on the *Southern Weekly* website. The page view of this article, which was based on deep investigation and material exploration, reached over 10.48 million people? with millions of comments. The three main characters (Su, Yu and Du)

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<sup>3</sup> *Southern Weekly* was founded in 1984 and is affiliated with Southern Newspaper Group (one of the party newspaper groups). It is one of most credible news weeklies in China.

were depicted in different frames. First, Su: Her first identity framed in the report is a mother who was insulted; her second identity was an entrepreneur in debt. After the incident, 22 local enterprises jointly donated more than 100,000 Yuan for her; as a debtor, she has paid more than the principle. Through the above framing, it is not difficult for readers to cognize Su as an insulted mother, a respectable entrepreneur, and a debtor who has tried to pay off her debt. Second, Du: Du took off his trousers and insulted Su with his private parts in front of her son, Yu, and was stabbed by Yu and died of hemorrhagic shock. It was also exposed that he was connected with a gangland organization that had been banned by China's police; he once drove a car and hit a female college student to death and did not show his face in front of the girl's parents. His infamy gave him a bad reputation in the local community. Du insulted Su by both body movements and language "...if you lack money, you can sell yourself (to be a prostitute); one time charge 100 Yuan, and I can pay you 80 Yuan..." (*Southern Weekly*, 2017, March 23). The disclosure of the above details gave him the image of a villain who bullies the weak. Third, Yu: As the key character of the whole case, on the contrary, there is comparatively less description about him. "A son" was the only point emphasized in the article, which makes it easy for readers' to feel empathy.

It made the murder case which occurred nearly one year earlier become a widely discussed online issue. It relied on the unique narrative perspective and incisive views of professional journalists as well as the high credibility of traditional media. Conducting field investigations and interviews, the reporters illustrated the cause and effect of the accident, which caught people's attention successfully.

### **The Outbreak Period: Agenda Setting**

According to the agenda setting theory, mass communication cannot determine people's views, but can effectively influence what audiences know and the order of discussion by providing information and setting related agendas. After *Southern Weekly's* report, other newspapers actively engaged in the agenda setting process. Table 1 shows SMC-relevant newspaper coverage from March 25 to March 26. As these titles suggested, "legal justice" was indicated explicitly or implicitly in most of these reports. In addition, these articles or reports were widely forwarded or reproduced or by other news media. In just two days, the newspaper media set up strong public opinion.

**Table 1.**

*Newspaper Coverage from March 25 to March 26*

Newspaper Media	Title and Date of Publication (in Beijing time)
China Youth Daily	The young man stabbing the man who humiliated his mother was sentenced to life: please give citizens the legal justice to overcome evil (March 25, 00:00)
People's Daily	Mother was bullied, the bully was stabbed: How the law responds to the ethical dilemma (March 26, 01:45)
The Paper <sup>①</sup>	The "SMC": look forward to the justification of justice. (March 25, 22:17) The witness of the "SMC" told the details of the police's processing: The law enforcement recorder was on (March 25, 23:31) The investigation on "SMC" by The Paper (March 25, 23:56)
Xiake Island <sup>②</sup>	The "SMC": Losing trust in the judiciary is the most terrible thing (March 26, 01:11)
Legal Daily	The full text of "SMC" first instance judgment was disclosed! (March 26, 01:40 Beijing time)
Changjiang Daily	The son who stabbed the bully was sentenced to life what is the truth? The judgment of the first instance is here (March 26, 02:40)
Beijing Youth Daily	Yu's second-instance attorney: On the day of the crime, the debt collector was investigated for involvement in the case (March 26, 08:40)
West China City Daily	Yu's auntie: Did not see the stabbing, because she is blocking the police to leave (March 26, 18:47) Stabbing the mother's bully, how could be sentenced to life imprisonment? (March 26, 01:42)
The Beijing News <sup>③</sup>	How can judiciary bear evils that reach the societal lows (March 26, 00:13) Stabbing the man who insulted my mother (reprinted from Southern Weekly) (March 26, 12:17)

Note:

①The Paper: As a news platform, the paper was launched in 2014 and is the first achievement of the reform of Shanghai United Media Group (SUMG). Oriental Morning Post, which is one newspaper affiliated with SUMG, discontinued publication in January of 2017. All of its content and function was transferred to The Paper.

②Xiake Island: founded in 2014, Xiake Island WeChat public account is a section of the People's Daily overseas edition

③The Beijing News: Jointly founded in 2003 by two party newspaper groups of China - Southern Newspaper Group and Guangming Daily Newspaper Group, The Beijing News is a comprehensive city daily.

In the process of agenda setting, the newspapers presented their professional ability of in-depth reporting. After the outbreak of public opinion, they began to conduct investigations and interviews. *Beijing Youth Daily* deeply investigated the details of the case and the situation of Yu's family after his imprisonment; *The Paper* focused on the performance of the police at the time of the incident and restored the law enforcement scene; *China Youth Daily* reviewed the court's judgment, interviewed relevant people, and restored the details of the case; *China Business News* retrieved a large number of archives and found several cases of humiliation or murder caused by the civil loan sharks that had occurred over the years, and suggested the necessity of regulation on civil loans. A number of media continued to engage in reporting. Reports written from different angles supplemented "Stabbing the Man Who Insulted My Mother." All the reports offered an information base for the audience's comments, which is also the main driving force in formation and enhancement of public opinion.

### **Public Opinion Peak: Connecting the Official and Folk Opinion Fields**

Public opinion arrived at a peak on March 26 (Zhiwei Insight, 2019). According to the data of the People's Network Public Opinion Data Center (2017), as of March 26, around 22:00, there were 3,972 Internet media reports, 12 press newspaper articles, 366 APP articles, 1366 forum blogs, 4,072 microblog posts, and 2,352 WeChat articles. The above statistics do not include reprinting or forwarding. During the progress of information dissemination, newspapers exert a strong influence in connecting official and folk opinion fields and push public opinion to the peak.

From 1949 to 1976, China's public opinion was unified. One country, one voice. As the media and political environment changed, the unity of public opinion was broken. There are the official opinion field and the folk opinion field in China (Tong, 2012). The official public opinion relies on the authority of the government and faithfully promotes the principles and policies of the party and the government. The formation and development of official public opinion is well-organized and authoritative. However, when the government leads the public opinion formation, there are problems such as information lag, low credibility, and over emphasizing mainstream ideological values, as well as attaching more importance to propaganda value over news value. Conversely, the folk opinion field is the space for ordinary

people to generate and disseminate information. The information flow there is irregular, spontaneous and fast. Consequently, there also exist problems of information distortion. The two fields have the advantages required by each other. Thus, connecting the two and making use of their advantages is beneficial.

In the case of SMC, newspapers played an important role in connecting the two fields. First, newspapers helped to unify the folk voices. After the outbreak of public opinion, there were many voices on the Internet, but it was difficult for them to form complete and systematic expression. The newspapers unified the public appeal and voiced it. For instance, after the outbreak of SMC public opinion, the *Global Times* launched an online survey on its portal, WeChat, and Weibo to collect citizens' attitude and comments on SMC and published the survey results. According to the survey results, the attitude towards first trial result (Yu was sentenced to life imprisonment) found that 76.4% of respondents said "Oppose, the judgment is unreasonable," 17.1% said "It is hard to say," and 6.4% said "Support it, facts are clear and judgment is fair" (Global Public Opinion Investigation Center, 2017). Second, the newspapers established a connection between the two fields. Due to the different positions of the two sides, the official opinion field and the folk opinion field can easily produce different interpretation frameworks for the same public opinion event. In the case of SMC, according to the survey by the People's Network Public Opinion Data Center (2017), traditional media exemplified by the newspapers is the main information source of the two fields. The information of both sides was efficiently circulated with the assistance of newspapers, and eventually the consensus of the public opinion was formed. One survey demonstrated that from March 23 to March 26, 37% of the network topics were about "questioning the fairness of the judgment," 25% were about "how law enforcement department was involved in this case," 18% were about "improper act of Liaocheng local legal system," 9% were about "the danger of private usury," 7% were about "discussion on second trial," and 4% were about "the other topics" (Eefung Software, 2017). Eighty-seven percent of the netizens' agendas were about law and judiciary, which was highly consistent with the newspaper media agenda. The consistency of the media agenda and public agenda eventually influenced the government's response on this case: On March 26, the Shandong provincial higher people's court stated that the case had been appealed in advance and was in the stage

of comprehensive review; on the same day, the Supreme People's Procuratorate responded that personnel had been sent to Shandong province for a special investigation.

### **Public Opinion Fluctuation Period: Keeping Public Opinion Balance**

When public opinion entered a period of rapid development, the audiences were angry, questioning the fairness of the judgment, questioning the police work, and the dissatisfaction was flooding the network. The public opinion was so strong that even the central government could not ignore it, but there were still some institutions or individuals who disagreed. For instance, on March 26, a Jinan public security office<sup>4</sup> posted several Weibo posts in which the netizens who criticized Liaocheng public security office were degraded by metaphor "a donkey resists a bus?" Figure 1 is the screenshot of one of the microblogs. The post conveyed a message that no matter how hard the donkey tried, it was impossible to push the bus. This post provoked netizens' wide criticism and anger. Thousands of Weibo users, who referred to themselves as "donkeys," left critical comments. Although Liaocheng and Jinan are both cities in Shandong province, it seemed strange to these netizens that Jinan acted in that way when Liaocheng was criticized. Therefore, the netizens did some investigation on the Jinan public security office and found that in 2015 one of its subordinate enterprises participated in loan sharking and took the unique advantage of public security to collect debt. The public was irritated and reported it to government. As a representative of the authoritative newspaper media, *People's Daily* voiced the criticism in a timely manner. Its news commentary quickly swept the Internet and received of more than 2.55 million-page views. The Jinan public security office then received punishment from an upper government institution. The in-depth reporting of the case was a clever way to balance public opinion. In addition to reports, the news commentary in newspapers is also an indispensable aid. The in-depth report was rational and objective and provided the audience with the necessary factual information about the case, while news commentary emphasized evaluation and emotional guidance.

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<sup>4</sup> Jinan is the capital city of Shandong province.

**Figure 1.**

*Microblog "A Donkey Resists a Bus?"*



### **The Final Phase: Promoting the Second Instance**

At the final phase of the event, the newspapers kept leading the public opinion by continuing their coverage, and the agenda of “fairness of judgment” was continually emphasized. On May 27, the new trial was held; on June 23, the Shandong Higher People's Court announced Yu's legitimate self-defense. His sentence was changed from life imprisonment to 5-year imprisonment. Interactions between the judicial system and public opinion system were the main efforts of the newspapers. From nation-wide debates to social consensus, the newspapers played a critical role. It was not only the progress of one case, it was the progress of civic engagement; it was also a progress of judicial fairness of the country.

### **Discussion: Advantages and Suggestions**

In this section, combining what can be learned from the above case, the advantages of newspapers are discussed. Suggestions for more effective public opinion guidance in the new media era are also presented.

## **Advantages**

### ***The Content Advantage***

Nowadays much information on the Internet is suspect. Fake news and news inversion phenomena keep arising. On the other hand, speed and quantity are over-emphasized, while cause and effect are underemphasized. However, for their benefit, audiences need accurate and detailed information, even on the Internet era. Before the emergence of electronic media, newspapers were considered the most powerful mass media. They played an important role in regime supervision and democracy promotion. In the process of journalism development, not only credibility but also professional news producing skills were accumulated. Credibility is an important premise of public opinion guidance. Newspaper media can do a good job in in-depth reporting. Most in-depth reports focus on sensitive issues or social problems, which are the main concerns of the public. Based on professional deep investigations, newspapers cannot only offer audiences accurate news information but also a panorama of the news event. In terms of writing style, the language of traditional media is more formal and objective, offering facts to audiences.

### ***Management Advantage***

In China, the establishment of traditional media such as radio stations, television stations, and newspapers, have followed a very strict system of examination, approval, and registration. In terms of management, government leadership is adopted by all newspapers. The propaganda department of the party committee at all levels was appointed by the central government to manage newspapers at all levels. Thus, newspapers are required to promote ideological and political content, social ethics, and socialism core values, which could form a powerful force of public opinion guidance from top to bottom. Besides, due to the government management mode, it is comparatively easy for the newspapers to assemble together as a consistent voice, like in the SMC. Concentrated information output is another favorable factor for public opinion guidance.

## **Challenges and Suggestions**

Still there are some serious challenges confronted by newspapers, which can be concluded as the challenge brought by changing news consumption mode, as well as the production mode. Relevant suggestions are as follows.

### ***Change News Production and Release Mode: Digitalization***

This includes three components: content digitization, form digitization, and process digitization. 1) Content digitization is the conversion of news content into digital form that is identified and processed by digital technology. The content digitization is the premise for the digitalization of the newspaper industry; 2) form digitalization refers to digital text, digital video, digital voice, digital pictures, digital animation, and other forms corresponding to digital technology. Form digitization is the carrier of content digitization. Content and form digitalization require process digitalization; 3) process digitization is the process of collecting, editing, typesetting, transmitting, distributing, interacting, reading, storing, retrieving, and managing news information by digital technology. Process digitization is the technical requirement and inevitable result of content digitization and form digitization. Currently, China's newspaper industry has partially realized process digitalization for some aspects of news collecting, editing, typesetting, transmitting, and distributing by establishing newspaper websites or portals, Wechat/Weibo public accounts, and client applications. However, digital technology for interacting, reading, storing, retrieving, and managing news still needs to be improved. The next stages could include adopting new technology, like artificial intelligence technology, censor technology, and algorithms, into the process of news production and dissimulation.

### ***Increase Public Credibility of Newspapers***

In order to achieve this goal, newspapers need to 1) keep the advantage of in-depth reporting and increase the amount of reports that reveal social problems or injustices. Supervision report is an important means to uncover social problems. Focusing on the people's livelihood problems can help build and remain good relationships with the public; 2) enhance efforts to offer accurate and timely news. Establishing coordination between traditional media and new media platforms can be

an effective way of promoting public credibility; the prominent advantage of traditional newspapers is in-depth reporting and systematic news producing ability, while that of new media is fast communication speed and optimized interaction platforms. It will be beneficial for newspapers to establish coordination with new media platforms to overcome difficulties of report lagging and lack of interactivity.

### ***Concerning the Process of Public Opinion Guidance***

It is important to 1) value newspapers' information disclosure function. China has entered a period of social transformation, which inevitably causes uncertainties and social conflicts. People need to learn about social problems and be engaged in civic matters. Providing useful information is one important premise for guiding public opinion; 2) value the folk opinion field and regard folk opinions as an important information source. Newspaper media should set up public opinion surveillance centers, as *People's Daily* did, to trace public opinion at the period of incubation, and initiate guidance promptly; 3) value news facts. When public opinion events occur, newspapers should obey news development rules and avoid false reporting, underreporting, shallow reporting, and excessive reporting.

### **Summary**

In China, all newspapers are owned by the government, and are the main public opinion leading force. With the booming of new media, the Chinese media landscape has undergone huge changes, which have consequently triggered the changes of the public opinion ecosystem. On the one hand, newspapers are struggling to survive; on the other hand, all individuals and organizations on the Internet can express themselves, causing information overload. Public opinion guidance is becoming more and more challenging. Consensus formation is becoming increasingly more difficult in China.

This paper displayed one successful case in which Chinese newspapers guided online public opinion and exerted a huge societal impact. In the famous legal case of the SMC, through in-depth reporting and joint reporting, newspapers offered audiences an overview of the case, set the agenda of "fairness of judgment," and kept

the information exchange between the official opinion field and folk opinion field unblocked; eventually, public opinion consensus was formed.

From this case, we can conclude that newspapers are not dead. We can summarize the advantages of Chinese newspapers: content production advantages and management and operation advantages. However, to improve Chinese newspapers' public opinion guidance ability, there are challenges to cope with, which are caused by changing information production and consumption mode. Two suggestions, changing news production and release mode and increasing the public credibility of newspapers, were proposed.

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### **Biographical Note**

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