Chinese Government’s Partition Management and the Fragmentation of Journalistic Ecology in the Age of Technological Transformation

技術變遷時代中國政府的分塊管理
與中國記者生態的分化

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Abstract

Drawing on Abbott’s jurisdictional conflict theory and ecological approach, this study examines the fragmented ecology of Chinese journalists against the backdrop of technological transformation, the role of the state in the fragmentation of Chinese journalistic ecology, and the interaction among the state and different segments of journalists. The qualitative data for analysis are drawn from 69 in-depth interviews with journalists, journalists’ self-reports, and relevant state policy materials.

Journalists are not a homogeneous group. Instead, they are divided into competing “segments” characterized by jurisdictional conflicts. This study focuses on three major “emerging groups” of Chinese journalists: journalists in party-controlled media conglomerates, journalists in internet giants, and journalists in news startups that have emerged following the boom of mobile communication technologies. While the rise of technology has widened the gulf between the three segments, collaboration and migration among them may yet have provided linkages. Nevertheless, state-led “partition management”, executed through licensure and affiliation, has further fractured the three segments. Licensure partitions journalists into those with the legitimacy to produce original political news (journalists working for party-controlled media) and those without (journalists employed by internet giants and news startups). While licensure restricts reporting space for the latter, affiliation creates a strong control network over those journalists allowed to produce political news. Affiliation decides their administrative ranks, business scope, and, crucially, resources to survive the technological transformation. The hinge of affiliation is contingent on the crisscrossed (Tiao-Kuai) structure of the Chinese government – another ecology with a variety of actors. Importantly, licensure and affiliation have shaped the strategies adopted by the three journalistic segments when interacting with the political ecology, and also among
themselves. In this process, the three segments have gradually occupied spatially separate locations in the journalistic ecology. The term “partition management”, i.e. the state-led media control mechanism, does not suggest the explicit intention on part of the state, but refers to the consequence of the aforementioned interactive process. Decisions made by the state underpin the fragmentation of Chinese journalists in the age of technological transformation. In addition, this study reveals the formation of a new relationship between the state and journalism, named “embedded exchange”, in which the state is becoming a marketplace seeking various professional services from journalists. Many journalists can benefit from providing services to this “state market”. The journalistic and political ecology are entangled in a reciprocal exchange of resources.