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Shifting Press Boundaries, Political Economy, and Opinion Production at Southern Metropolis Daily
媒體話語邊界之嬗變：

政治經濟學與《南方都市報》的言論生產

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Abstract

The dynamic interplay between journalists’ autonomy and political-economic structural constraints permeates different levels of news production. This research investigates opinion production at *Southern Metropolis Daily (SMD)* that was perceived as an exemplar of the Chinese market-oriented newspapers in the past two decades but witnessed visible decline in recent years. It focuses on how the *SMD* journalists push press boundaries and what have contributed to the rise and decline of the *SMD*’s opinion boldness. Rather than analyzing the *SMD* as an isolated case, I connect opinion production at *SMD* to the paper’s relationship with the Nanfang Media Group (NMG), Guangdong’s provincial power elites, the central authority, the press market and the audience.

Combining theories of media sociology with political economy of communication, this thesis analyzes the enabling and disabling factors at the individual, intra-organizational, inter-organizational, and extra-organizational levels that shaped the *SMD*’s discursive boundaries. It finds that press boundaries vary across different time periods and different political and organizational settings. Press commercialization, journalists’ professional pursuits, and the changing power structure contributed to the rise of *SMD*’s opinion pages. The opinion pages’ boldness was further enhanced by the loose NMG-*SMD* power relationship, the Nanfang newspapers’ organizational culture that valued the media groups’ responsibility to subordinate journalists within the Party’s limit. A simple content analysis on key terms such as “universal values,” “civil society,” “constitutionalism,” etc. shows that the *SMD*’s opinion pages demonstrated eminent outspokenness between 2003 and 2008, followed by an accommodation period of 2009-2011, then witnessed drastic decline since during 2012 and 2014. This editorial transformation, from micro to macro level, was resulted from (1)
strengthened and institutionalized organizational self-censorship and internal fragmentation in terms of news values and of leadership-subordinate relationship; (2) with the rise of conservative leadership, the NMG maintained tighter control of its subsidiary newspapers’ critical personnel and editorial orientation; (3) the politicization of ideological stigma on the Nanfang newspapers as “traitor media” because of their perceived “liberal bias” in the Maoist and nationalist vision, which threatened Nanfang’s institutional legitimacy and led to justification of intensified organizational self-censorship; (4) strengthened and even particularistic official control over Nanfang newspapers due to their adverse-demonstration effect in the ideological arena after 2008; (5) declined supportive political patrons that could shield the Nanfang newspapers in crisis situation; and (6) the recessionary press market and decreased professional morale as more and more journalists left and are leaving the profession.

Specifically, by locating the SMD in Guangzhou’s specific socio-political contexts, the thesis finds that changes in power relations between the central and local political elites contributed to redefining press boundaries of the permissible. This research divides the roles of the Guangdong political elites into three categories, i.e., central agent, provincial interest defender, and career survival-seeker. A longitudinal examination of the structure of Guangdong’s political elites indicates that political influence of the provincial defenders is declining, whereas the central agents and career survival-seekers are rising. Declining open-minded political patron means fewer and fewer efficient buffering mechanisms between the Nanfang newspapers and external power holders. Historically speaking, from the mid-1990s to early 2000s, the Nanfang newspapers enjoyed relatively autonomous space during press commercialization to develop media professionalism. Yet, in the 2010s, with increasing centralization of central-local
power structure, the Nanfang newspapers could no longer enjoy former discursive space for media autonomy. The changing central-local power relations conditioned the patron-client relationship between the NMG and external power holders. As a response, the NMG exerted tighter control over its subsidiary newspapers including the SMD, which in turn reshaped the latter’s organizational culture, editorial values and journalistic morale. This thesis thus notes the significance of investigating the existence of the semi-autonomous press’s political patrons in China’s authoritarian political context.

The thesis holds that journalistic boldness at metropolitan newspapers like the SMD is not a natural, linear, and intended consequence of media commercialization. Rather, it is an outcome of the intricate interactions among press ecology, media organizational goals, journalists’ role perceptions, and the shift of the central-local power relationships. This dissertation concludes that the agency of the Nanfang journalists can be restored or enhanced only (1) when the provincial patron is relatively powerful and willing to shield journalists from external interference of hardline power holders; (2) when the gap between local and central power elites exists to a certain degree that creates legitimate discursive space for the press; (3) when the parent media organization provides solid protection for the subsidiary newspapers’ journalists; (4) when news organizations are still committed to media professionalism that sustain press credibility on the market; and (5) when the ideologically divided audience does not result in restricting the press’s editorial autonomy.