



Journalist questions: comparing adversarialness in Chinese political press conferences

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 September 2015

Received in revised form

5 February 2016

Accepted 12 February 2016

Available online 20 February 2016

Keywords:

Media

Journalist questions

Adversarialness

Chinese political press conference

Question design

Political communication

ABSTRACT

This article examines journalist questions within the context of Chinese political press conferences. The focus of the analysis is on journalistic adversarialness and whether there is measurable difference in the use of adversarial questioning between Chinese journalists and those associated with a free media system. Coding was carried out using a modified version of Clayman et al.'s (2006) question analysis system, which uses content features and question design to assess the level of question adversarialness. All journalist questions were given a total adversarialness score. Significant differences were found between the level of adversarialness of questions asked by journalists from countries associated with a free media system and Chinese journalists. Cultural and socio-political issues that may provide possible interpretations of these differences are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Media commercialization and internationalization in China in the past two decades have transformed most formerly state-owned media institutions into financially independent business entities, leading to greater levels of freedom of expression and openness (Winfield and Peng, 2005). However, given a series of government controls over media including censorship, state monopoly and journalist appointment restrictions, the freedom of media in China is ultimately conditioned by the political bottom line (Winfield and Peng, 2005; Yu, 1994; Zhao, 1998). Oppositional views and opinions are tolerated only when they do not challenge Party ideology or confront government positions (Winfield and Peng, 2005; Yu, 1994). While political news interviews commonly occur in many western countries (e.g. Clayman and Heritage, 2002a), in China, public communication that requires direct interaction and instant responses from government officials are among the least preferred method of communication (Chen, 2003).

This study focuses on journalists' questions in press conferences held by the Chinese government during the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) sessions. As symbols of Chinese

democracy (Liu and Chen, 2013), NPC and CPPCC provide a forum for discussing social and economic problems and for proposing new policies. Following the scheduled NPC and CPPCC sessions, press conferences are held in order to provide domestic and international journalists with the opportunity to directly interact with state leaders and to be updated concerning NPC and CPPCC policies and decisions. The unscripted question-driven (Heritage and Roth, 1995) press conference that occurs following the NPC and CPPCC is one of the most spontaneous forms of political communication in China.

Comparative analysis of how journalists from different socio-political backgrounds approach the state leaders of China, particularly in terms of how they frame and ask questions in the press conferences, can reveal links between journalism culture and media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) and provide insights into the ideological and cultural assumptions underlying the Chinese political system. Yet relatively few cross-cultural studies have investigated how journalists from different socio-political backgrounds interact with government officials in such encounters. Situated within the context of Chinese political press conferences (CPPCs), this study aims to investigate the differences in the use of adversarial questioning between Chinese journalists and journalists from countries with a higher level of press freedom. The following section will set the groundwork by initially discussing previous research into journalistic adversarialness in China and other countries before moving to a discussion of the CPPCs. Finally, we present the current study and findings.

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2. Journalistic adversarialness

Adversarialness is encoded in journalists' linguistic and discursive behavior "involving not only what questions are asked but also how they are asked in ways that exert varying degrees of pressure and constraint on politicians" (Clayman et al., 2006: 563). Previous research shows that journalistic adversarialness is not only demonstrated in news stories (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b; Eriksson, 2011; Robinson, 1981), but also in face-to-face interactions (Adkins, 1992; Bull, 2012; Clayman and Heritage, 2002a, 2002b; Rawnsley and Rawnsley, 2006; Rendle-Short, 2007).

Studies of US journalism have shown that journalists in the postwar era have become increasingly aggressive and adversarial in their treatment of government officials (e.g. Clayman and Heritage, 2002b). For example, in a study comprising fifty personal interviews and sixty questionnaires from representatives, staff, and reporters in the US Congress between 1977 and 1980, Robinson (1981) found that around 93% of respondents thought that the press had grown more hostile to Congress. Within the Swedish context, Eriksson (2011) analyzed the communicative techniques used when politicians' answers were cut and incorporated into television news stories from the year 1978, 1993 and 2003 and found that in the earlier periods, news journalism appeared as a mediator whereas in the latter periods, it became an "interpreter" or "critical interrogator of politicians' responses" (Eriksson, 2011: 66).

The trend toward adversarial journalistic treatment of politicians has also been manifested in journalists' questioning strategies during face-to-face interaction with politicians. Clayman et al.'s (2006) analysis of journalistic questions in presidential news conferences from Eisenhower to Clinton reveals a long-term decline in deference to the president and a rise of more adversarial forms of questioning. Similarly, in the UK, there has been fast growth in journalistic adversarialness since competition was introduced into the media after the BBC's monopoly was replaced by a duopoly with the creation of the independently operated television network of ITV in the 1950s (Bull, 2012; Clayman and Heritage, 2002a). The adversarial nature of journalistic questions, particularly within the political news interviews, has also been noted in Australia (e.g. Adkins, 1992; Rendle-Short, 2007). As Rendle-Short (2007) states, it is not uncommon for journalists to openly challenge politicians within the Australian political context.

However, journalists in some other countries show more deference to politicians. Cohen (1989), for example, analyzed and compared television news interviews in the US and UK with South Africa news interviews recorded in 1984. Cohen (1989) found that the largest number of challenges occurred in the American interviews. Regarding word choice, not a single case was found in the South African interviews where pejorative or provocative expressions were used, whereas such expressions were present in American and British journalistic questions.

Like journalists in South Africa, Chinese journalists also place lower value on challenging politicians; they rank humility and loyalty higher than aggressiveness and inquisitiveness (Brislin, 1997). Jiang (2006) investigated the pragmatic differences in the question-answer sequences of government press conferences held in China and US on the North Korea nuclear crisis over a period of 5 months. Journalists' questions, defined as requests, were coded for the following four function types: requests for specific information; requests for confirmation; requests for clarification; and requests for comments. Jiang (2006) found that American journalists asked many more clarification and confirmation questions. These were considered adversarial and face-threatening challenges against the authority. In contrast, Chinese journalists asked more questions for comments. These were deemed more

acceptable in Chinese culture as they were less likely to offend politicians (Jiang, 2006).

3. The Chinese political press conferences

In China, both the local and national governments hold press conferences frequently for various communicative purposes. Over 500 domestic and international journalists are invited to each press conference held by the national government during the NPC and CPPCC sessions. For example, in the 2007 CPPC, 750 journalists were invited. Of these, 200 journalists were from the Mainland, 200 journalists from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, and 350 journalists were from other countries.

The CPPC falls into Greatbatch's (1988) categorization of rituals and ceremonies whose turn-taking systems pre-specify the order in which turns should be taken. In CPPCs, both domestic and foreign journalists have to put up their hand to bid for the opportunity to raise a question. The host of the press conference calls on one journalist at a time to ask a question. On average, around 14 journalists are given a question opportunity at each press conference. They are all restricted to a single turn albeit they can elaborate their turns in different ways. The selection criteria of why particular journalists are chosen are not announced. However, there is a balance in the number of domestic and foreign journalists who are selected to ask a question at each conference, which in turn allows observation and comparison of the adversarialness of journalists from different backgrounds in the same context.

4. The present study

Different levels of adversarialness have been examined in relation to journalists' demographic and professional attributes such as gender, the status of their organization, and their familiarity with the politicians (Clayman et al., 2012) as well as government-media relations (Zhang, 2012). Yet minimal research has investigated the difference as related to the level of press freedom, which shapes the journalism culture. While Jiang's (2006) study addresses adversarialness through an analysis of the functions of journalists' questions, this study quantitatively measures journalistic adversarialness and examines its relationship with freedom of press. It compares the level of adversarialness in questions asked by two groups of journalists within the CPPC context – those associated with Mainland China, called JCNs (journalists from China); and those associated with a greater degree of press freedom, called JFCs (journalists from free media countries).

The categorization of JFCs is based on the level of press freedom of the countries, in which the journalists' affiliated organizations are based, as specified by the Freedom of the Press index (Freedom House, 2013). The index assesses "the degree of print, broadcast, and internet freedom through an examination of the legal environment in which media operate, political influences on reporting and access to information, and economic pressures on content and the dissemination of news" (Freedom House, 2013: 3). Press in China is 'not free' and its ranking is 179 out of 191 in the index. The countries with 'free' press include the US, UK, Germany, France, Japan and many others.

5. The data and hypothesis

The data for this study were drawn from 16 recorded press conferences between 1998 and 2000–2014, around 35 h in total. Both the video recordings and transcripts can be downloaded from

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