

1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Chongsan, C., Postscript: News and the Chinese public, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 2, 1997, 90-91.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss2/10>

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POSTSCRIPT: News And The Chinese Public

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Marx once remarked that news was "a vocal tie ... to link a person with his nation and the whole world ..." (see the Complete Works of Marx and Engles, V. 26). Thus regardless of race, nation, or color of skin, people have an inherent need to interact with the outside world. People need to know what goes on within and without so as to be well-attuned to their surroundings. In this sense, all have a common frame for assessing news, the most basic of which is the currency of information of all happenings. What the public require of news is freshness, importance, authenticity, approximateness, practicality and objectivity.

However, the audiences' concept of news value is not inborn, but acquired from cultural norms and practices. Our concept of news is rooted deeply in our society. Where there are different transmission systems, there are different transmission milieu and different transmission contexts, giving rise to different concepts of news value.

Since I started my research on news and the public in China the early 1980's, I have always asked my subjects: "What's your favorite news?" The response I get from people in Beijing has always been news is the "policies of the Communist Party of China". To Westerners, this might be hard to understand. They do not know that China then practised a planned economy under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. The whole nation was supposed to pivot on the Party's policies. The people could not live freely unless they had a good understanding of the Party policies.

Since opening to the outside world, China has made great efforts to build and publicize its legal systems. The Chinese government have come to realize the importance of "doing things according to law". Thus, the reportage of law has drawn great public attention. Interest in reportage of law ranked sixth in an audience survey in Beijing (1982), third in Zhejiang (1983) and second in Urumqi (1987).

To meet the public demand for news on the law, many newspapers focusing on legal issues have appeared. My investigation found that international news are most popular ever

since China adopted an open door policy. The majority of Chinese would like to know more about the outside world for their better communication and interaction with foreign friends.

The transmitters of news (i.e. editors and reporters) think the media should supply what the public want to know. The fact is all media in the world are actually manipulated by a handful of people to represent the will or benefit of a party or a business group despite 'advertising' themselves as tools of the public. A transmitter, no matter what he thinks of news, has to submit to his "boss" and to abide by the editorial policies. In this sense, freedom of press is only relative, not absolute.

China's newspapers are official organs, the main task of which is to report what happens within the organization or government. Chinese students who study journalism are so inculcated with the love of the Party and submission to the Party that they tend to have a stereotyped mindset. They are always "strung out" as to whether to gather news or not, whether to report or not; and if they have decided to report, they have to consider how to write and how to report. They have to consider how they can comply with the Party's policies or spirit.

Since the introduction of journalistic reforms in the early 1980's, which began to lay emphasis on the public needs in running newspapers, radio networks and TV stations, the mentality of editors and reporters has changed to some extent. As we can see, since the beginning of the 1990's, China's journalism has shown signs of rapid commercialisation. The heated competition in the media market is bound to change the news value of China's reporters and editors, who will gradually regard the public as their "god". ■