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Fighting Corruption in China Using the Media

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ABSTRACT: It has long been acknowledged that the media plays a critical role in fighting corruption and promoting good governance. In the Chinese context, because of the nature of the media system and censorship, the mainstream discourse of corruption is controlled by the central government. However, social media has created a robust and widely accessible civil space for journalists and civil society to engage in anti-corruption. This article explores the media's practices in curbing corruption on both state-owned media and social media in China. Using case studies, it aims to address two questions: How and by what methods (e.g. news, documentaries) does the government communicate anti-corruption information to the public through the state-owned media? How does Chinese civil society utilize social media to interact with authority and participate in the fight against corruption? On these grounds, policy implications and recommendations for reducing corruption in China are put forth.

KEYWORDS: fighting corruption, state-owned media, social media, China

Introduction

Many cases around the world have demonstrated the media's effect on eliminating systematic corruption. However, it is hard—perhaps impossible—for media to function successfully in every country, considering the media tends to be vulnerable to threats and temptation from the outside; e.g., government, politics and elite economic groups/companies. The characteristics of the media itself also impact the media's effective function in anti-corruption; such characteristics include the ownership of the media, the media's working culture, qualified professional journalists and the media framing.

This article examines how media functions in the fight against corruption in China, concentrating on the interactions among media, civil society and the Party-State on anti-corruption. Materials used in the analysis include news reports, documentary and drama series broadcast on state-owned media, and the most influential case of a high-ranking corrupt official first uncovered on social media by an independent journalist. The article starts with an introduction to the Chinese media system, which is highly censored but still contains opportunities for political discussion. Then, it turns to the analysis of government-led anti-corruption communication, using the specific case of China Central Television (CCTV)'s anti-corruption news reporting and the documentaries and drama series co-aired by the Party-State and the TV stations. Special attention has also been paid to how journalists and civil society engage in combatting corruption via social media, and the benefits and potential risks of online anti-corruption efforts.

Media system and censorship in China

The original media control system in China, which emerged during the 1950s, is a transplant from the former Soviet Union, which regarded media as a link between the Communist Party and the people with the purpose of communicating socialist contents. The media therefore is under tight political control and fully financed by the

government. After former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping initiated economic reforms in 1978, with a focus on market economy and external openness, the media system adhered to a course of reconstruction and liberalization. Although state control of media still obtains, the mass media had to care about consumers' needs and assume a commercial orientation. The government subsidy was provided to only a few national media organizations (e.g. People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television), while others had to maintain self-reliance. However, the freedom of both print and broadcast media is conditional, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio Film and Television is under the control of Party Central Committee's Propaganda Department, both of which oversees the media industry in China.

With the Internet and social media boom in China, the relationship between the media system and political expression became complicated. Online political communication, generated and disseminated by the public, incorporates a new element, which may alter existing relationships between political communication, nationalism and social change in China (Hyun & Kim 2015). Given the rapid growth of the Internet and high penetration of social media in public life in China, it is impossible for the Chinese authority to impose complete control over the media. Margaret Roberts, in her book *Censored*, described the Chinese censorship system as a "porous censorship". Using digital data from the Chinese Internet and leaks from China's Propaganda Department, she identified Chinese censorship's porous nature as the censorship that is neither seamless nor complete - much of China's censorship works, not by making information impossible to access, but by requiring those seeking information to spend extra time and money to gain access (Roberts 2018).

Government-led communication on anti-corruption information

The case of China Central Television (CCTV) was examined, which is the most predominant state television broadcaster in China, to observe how the government utilizes this platform to convey anti-corruption information. Among all the new programs produced by CCTV, *Xinwen Lianbo*, a half-hour daily news program (starting at 7pm), is highly selective and censored: the government forced the program to be aired simultaneously by all local TV stations in Mainland China and serve as a megaphone for the State and the Party. It has a history of more than 40 years, as it was first broadcast in 1978. *Xinwen Lianbo* has a unique political value in Chinese society; it has proven to be a great example of the construction of political reality by journalistic text on the symbolic level (Chang & Ren 2016).

The research collects key news reports from *Xinwen Lianbo*, related to corruption and anti-corruption information, from 1 January 2016 to 1 January 2017. The biggest campaign against corruption in China in recent years, began at the end of 2012, following the November conclusion of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. The campaign lasted five years, ending in 2017. According to the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, in 2017, the score reached 41, the highest in recent years (The scale of score is from 0 to 100, with 0 meaning highly corrupt and 100 meaning very clean); this signifies an improvement in the corruption situation. Therefore, the news from the year of 2016 to 2017 reflects some features of information dissemination during an anti-corruption campaign, especially as the campaign was approaching its end and attaining its objectives.

The data for the present news coverage was drawn from *Xinwen Lianbo* news database on CCTV's official website (http://tv.cntv.cn/videoset/C10437). The archival search was conducted using the keywords "corruption"（腐败）, "the central commission for discipline inspection"（中纪委）, "malfeasance"（违纪）, and "supervision"（监督）. All the samples were aggregated into a pool, which was read manually, case-by-case, to

remove duplicates and tease out accurate news stories that were directly related to the corruption cases and anti-corruption campaign. The news coverage analysis focused on three factors: coverage quantity, news subjects and reporting agenda.

The results showed 46 related news articles were published in the given time period. The most coverage was in January 2016, while the least coverage was in February 2016. This sharp contrast was likely due to the fact that 8 February was the Chinese New Year of 2016 (Spring Festival). According to social custom and Chinese culture context, negative news must be removed in most cases. As such, even the news media tends, for the most part, to avoid reporting news that might make people feel bad. However, at the same time, as the biggest festival in China, the Spring Festival also represents a high-risk holiday opportunity for corruption, as many government officials receive gifts, luxury banquets, and bribes during holidays, at all kinds of occasions, such as gatherings of families and friends. That is why, in January, the number of anti-corruption media reports is the highest out of the whole year. The holiday-sensitive corruption reporting also reflects on other big holidays, such as May (Labor) Day and National Day. Along with the Spring Festival, these three festivals give the public week-long public holidays. Similar to the contrast between January and February, such disparity can also be observed between April and May (7 in April vs. 1 in May), September and October (4 in September vs. 2 in October). Based on a monthly comparison of the amount of news reporting coverage, the first conclusion can be reached that the high season for reporting tends to be any month before the big holidays; during the actual holiday period, there is much less reporting.

Table 1. Number of Monthly News Reports

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
11	0	3	7	1	2	1	3	4	2	8	4

After analysing the quantity of news reporting, the news content was examined. The news reporting covers three subjects: high-ranking officials' corruption cases, anti-corruption rules and regulations, and typical clean government/official cases (probity) propaganda. All corruption cases reported by the program use, as their sole source, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, which are short, results-only reports without more details about investigation process. For example, on 10 August, the news about the corruption case of Liaoning Province chief (a high-ranking State-Party official) only reported the penalty decision within the Party and the coming court procedure, but provided no detailed about the nature of the corruption, how the investigation determined that the chief was corrupt or the precise seriousness of the chief's corruption. Furthermore, there aren't even interviews embedded in the coverage of the corruption cases. During the 2-3 minutes news reports, there was only a related image and the news anchor's voice in the news. Regarding anti-corruption rules/campaigns news, the agenda is uniform: government institutions made/emphasized anti-corruption regulations and rules, which would undoubtedly achieve great results and benefit the public. The news was nominally about the anti-corruption regulations and anti-corruption education to the public, but in fact, they serve as the propaganda celebrating the government's purported good deeds. Because such news offers no scientific interpretation of the regulations, or any detailed information about how the public might take part in fighting corruption, it is virtually impossible for the public to absorb sufficient anti-corruption education through this news reporting. The only news topic that may give people a sense of proximity to events is the news reporting about typical clean governance cases. These cases come from the grass-roots basic level, such as rural government agencies or low-ranking officials. By reporting on these models,

the news coverage provides a demonstrative model of how probity operates the society and advocates the clean governance in the country.

Table 2. News Subjects

Topic	Frequency
Corruption cases	20
Anti-corruption rules and regulations	21
Clean government/official cases	5

In addition to the news reporting, another "investment" by the central government and the Party in anti-corruption information communication is the documentary and drama series released in 2016 and 2017. In October 2016, CCTV-1 and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection co-aired an 8-episode documentary series called *Always on the Road*, which featured the confessions and pleas for forgiveness of some high-ranking government/Party officials who were convicted of corruption. The documentary made examples of eight corrupt officials, putting them onscreen to describe how they started to conduct government business in a corrupt manner and their reflections after their convictions. These eight interviewees for the documentary were strategically chosen; they were all very high-ranking officials before their convictions, which meant that the public had never had the chance to see any negative news coverage about them through Chinese media. Therefore, the documentary opened a new window for the public to see the sharply disparate images of these officials, before and after their convictions for corruption, as the filmmakers argued, the documentary was aimed at creating an effective deterrent environment for corruption. However, the story-telling frame of the documentary is of corruption as an individual crime, characterized by a focus on individual responsibility, without mentioning the integrity and accountability of the system.

In 2017, Hunan Television Station, China's most successful marketized TV Station, cooperating with the Prosecutor General's Office, the highest national-level agency responsible for both prosecution and investigation in China, released a TV drama series, *In the Name of the People*, which was one of the most-watched TV drama series in China in 2017. The series narrated the fictional political account a group of corrupted officials being unearthed through the efforts of prosecutors. The drama series became a sensation because it revealed a political and power struggle, of unprecedented intensity, that is seldom portrayed on the Chinese television screen; it has been referred to as the Chinese *House of Cards*. Although it is a fictional story based on a web novel, the stories of *In the Name of the People* are believed to be extremely close to reality, and therefore it made the public feel close to officialdom and political corruption situation. Support from the Prosecutor General's Office of China, on the one hand, helped the drama to bypass the censorship regulations, but on the other hand, limited how deeply the corruption story could be filmed to meet the requirements of not challenging the political system, as laid out by Chinese top leaders.

Journalists and civil society's anti-corruption engagement via social media

Social media grew fast in recent decades, as the number of Internet users in China rapidly increased. Although the authorities tightly controlled sensitive political online statements on various social platforms, censorship's porous nature in China, as mentioned above, still created a robust and widely accessible civil space for the public to exchange ideas and promote discussion. Also, because the reporting process is not efficient, the central anti-corruption institutions (this mainly refers to the Prosecutor General's Office and the Central

Commission for Discipline Inspection) are not transparent and highly bureaucratic, people were compelled to turn to social media to engage in public discussions. These two reasons explained why a growing number of corruption cases in China were always being exposed first on social media, after which they caught more general attention. Individuals combating corruption using individual accounts on social media are, on the one hand, at risk of being vulnerable to revenge and punishment; on the other hand, social media seems to be the only (not to mention the cheapest and most convenient) way for individual citizens to unearth corruption to the public in China.

Given that prominent foreign social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, have been blocked in China since 2009, the main social media platforms in Mainland China are Weibo and WeChat. A new phrase, "Weibo Anti-corruption," emerged in 2011 and refers to the specific social phenomenon of netizens revealing corrupt behaviors via Weibo, the most-used microblog social media app in China. The most powerful official accused of corruption reported on the Weibo platform is Liu Tienan, who was then the director of the National Energy Agency and deputy head of China's National Development and Reform Committee (China's top economic planning body). His corrupt behavior was disclosed by veteran investigative journalist Luo Changping in November 2012. After spending one-year collecting evidence of Liu's corruption, Luo published the allegations in full via his personal Weibo account and under his real name. In an interview with CNN, he admitted that it would be hard to duplicate it (his successful investigation) again, because there were so many coincidences and difficulties - he acted alone, and few media wanted to be involved in this case (Brown 2013, *CNN*). At first, Liu denied the charges, but eventually, in May 2013, he was officially dismissed by Chinese authorities for committing "serious disciplinary violations." He was sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime of bribery in December 2014.

Before the social media era in China, that corruption reporting from a grassroots public can achieve such results could not have been imagined. Except for the profound courage and work of Luo Changping – he thereafter received the Integrity Award from Transparency International, the tremendous online support for anti-corruption and increasingly growing power of social media users are the key factors pushing the authorities to respond, react and investigate, instead of engaging in concealment or retaliation.

However, the "Weibo anti-corruption" can only provide a temporary and short-term solution for fighting corruption in China. In a mature society, the rule of law and functional public institutions serve as the fundamental guarantees to curb corruption. In China, civil society assumed the responsibility to direct and investigate corruption, and utilized the rapid speed and huge communication power from social media to force authorities to react to the corruption. It is a risky decision, given the severe censorship and political context in China, and no one can guarantee that such reporting will have successful results. The successful cases are from tens of thousands of instances of corruption reporting on Weibo that did not receive any attention, were censored by the authorities or avenged by the reported officials.

Another interesting finding is that there seems to have been a peak time period, from 2012 to 2014, for "Weibo anti-corruption." In the recent few years, even though there has been a large amount of alleged-corruption reporting on social media, there were no cases with such huge influence and shock value as before. The reasons for this are complicated, but one cannot be overlooked: due to the lack of a fact-checking mechanism, anyone can allege any official is conducting corruption on social media, with neither check nor investigation. In some cases, online reporting and revelations became the tool of struggling political interests, and the always-strong public support gradually became numbness. This is the inevitable consequence of online anti-corruption efforts that depend only on power and passion from grassroots campaigns.

Results and Discussions

The 46 pieces of news reporting from 2016 to 2017 on the news program *Xinwen Lianbo* on the state-owned CCTV depict the State-Party's typical approach to communicating with the public with regard to corruption/anti-corruption information in China: the reporting is time sensitive, which means less reporting during the holidays and a high frequency of reporting before holidays. The news reports are conveyed in an imperative style and cover three subjects: high-ranking officials' corruption cases, anti-corruption rules and regulations, and typical clean government/official cases propaganda. Although *Xinwen Lianbo* is an extreme example as the most censored/controlled news program in China, other news programs in Mainland China share lots of common features in reporting corruption issues. The documentary and drama series co-aired by the TV stations and the State-Party are also important tools for the government to communicate anti-corruption information. They were big steps forward as covering high-ranking officials' corruption stories was extremely sensitive in Chinese political contexts. The main functions of government-led communication on anti-corruption are trying to deter people (especially government officials) away from conducting corruption and to pacify public discontent about severe corruption by showing that the government and the Party have done a lot to combat it.

In contrast to top-down communication via traditional media, anti-corruption discussions through social media are completely bottom-up. Social media users in China have channels to uncover and discuss government officials and their corruption behavior. However, anti-corruption coverage on social media can only address corruption on a case-by-case basis; it cannot effect any change or contribute to the anti-corruption system.

Considering the Chinese cultural and political contexts, the road to transparent government and accountability is not an easy one. Curbing corruption should be the common career for both the public and the civil society. Rather than blocking corruption news or applying severe censorship to corruption-related information, government institutions should build regulations and guidance to better guide civil society's engagement in combating corruption. Also, fulfilling an important watchdog role, the media and journalists should have more protection and freedom to report corruption. To achieve that, press law or regulations should be drafted.

There is a trend in China, whereby journalists and media are becoming more self-censored and focused on reporting entertainment news to keep them safe from government retaliation. However, the anti-corruption fight cannot enjoy any success without the media and journalists, especially in a country like China. Skillful strategies should be promoted for journalists to report corruption news in relative safety. For example, reporting a news story that involves, but avoiding explicit mention of the topic in the news title may reduce the possibility of being tracked or censored. Also, international cooperation with a news agency outside of China may help the story receive international attention, and in turn push the Chinese authorities to react. These reporting "tips" should not be the primary focus of professional journalists, but they may be effective for reporting in cases of strong censorship.

Furthermore, because the political engagement approaches open to the public are limited in China; people have rare experience and knowledge of how to engage in politics, it falls on nonprofit organizations (and educational institutions) to do the work of media and digital literacy education, letting people know how to tell what is or most likely to be true, and how to make the best use of social media to combat corruption. By cultivating a strong and educated civil society, the anti-corruption endeavor would proceed more smoothly and get further in China.

Conclusions

The article discussed how media is utilized in China to curb corruption. The Chinese government and the Party firmly seized the state-owned media as the "megaphones" to distribute the corruption related news. Their news content and agenda present a uniform character that is super-bureaucratic and mandatory. The other method of government-led anti-corruption communication is through documentary and drama series, a more entertaining way to balance their simple and blunt news communication method. The documentary and the drama series are carefully designed and their contents are kept in a safe political zone controlled by the administration. The potential message behind the government-led news reports and the documentary is that combating corruption is not a business of the public, and the public deserves only the final decision in the corruption cases made by the authorities, and not the details.

Social media has shifted this power relationship—tremendous public pressure forced the administration to investigate corruption cases that were reported and discussed on social media sites. The effects of anti-corruption practices on social media are mixed. It provoked public attention and discussion on corruption issues and successfully sent some high-ranking corrupt officials to jail. However, such social media justice may have harmful potency without independent judicial process. Also, with censorship regulations toward social media tightening in China, the anti-corruption information can be completely deleted overnight by the government. In sum, anti-corruption activity on social media in China is a conditional freedom given to the public to take part in the fight against corruption.

Fighting corruption in China using the media indicates an example of how media can impact anti-corruption endeavors in an authoritarian regime. The relationship among government, journalists, and civil society is never easy and smooth, but only through the involvement of all stakeholders can the rule of law—the core value needed to combat corruption—be built.

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