

Contextualization: A Path to Chinese Traditional News Media's Integration Into Social Media

Guo, Difan; Wang, Haiyan; Xu, Jinghong

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Guo, D., Wang, H., & Xu, J. (2024). Contextualization: A Path to Chinese Traditional News Media's Integration Into Social Media. *Media and Communication*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7429>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Contextualization: A Path to Chinese Traditional News Media's Integration Into Social Media

Difan Guo ¹ , Haiyan Wang ² , and Jinghong Xu ¹ 

¹ School of Journalism and Communication, Beijing Normal University, China

² Department of Communication, University of Macau, Macao SAR, China

Correspondence: Jinghong Xu (123abctg@163.com)

Submitted: 31 July 2023 **Accepted:** 20 October 2023 **Published:** 29 February 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Unpacking Innovation: Media and the Locus of Change” edited by Scott A. Eldridge II (University of Groningen), Frank Harbers (University of Groningen), and Sandra Banjac (University of Groningen), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i397>

Abstract

Meyrowitz's media context theory proposes that new media and their contexts will lead to new behaviors. This article adopts media context theory as a framework and utilizes a textual analysis approach to analyze what Meyrowitz termed middle region behaviors and the contextualization strategies of the traditional Chinese news media (*People's Daily*) on the social media platform Weibo. The findings reveal three of *People's Daily's* Weibo news' innovation strategies: the middle regionalization of news contexts (live news, vlog news, chatbox news); personalized production of important news (Weibo commentary, user-produced news); and equal dialogue with the public (daily greetings, holiday greetings, popularizing science). The study also indicates that traditional news media can utilize social media to consolidate communication effectiveness and reconstruct their credibility while actively participating in social governance. In light of these findings, we think that the “contextualization” strategies employed by *People's Daily* on the Weibo platform offer meaningful possibilities for traditional news organizations' integration into social media, such as exploring innovative approaches to news presentation, emphasizing audience interaction, appropriately providing “non-news content” for the audience, and maintaining a commitment to objectivity and fairness in news reporting.

Keywords

China; innovation strategy; news organizations; *People's Daily*; social media; traditional media

1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, many traditional Chinese news media organizations have suffered negative impacts from outdated media technology, brain drain, lack of sponsorship and funding, and self-published

media stealing audience attention (Wang, 2023). In 2017 alone, nearly 1,000 newspapers in China ceased publication, and over 300 others went bankrupt (SOHU, 2018). In order to survive and thrive, many traditional news media organizations have had to learn about the interests and needs of their audiences and seek business growth by developing new communication channels.

Due to limited capital and resources, most traditional news media cannot independently develop apps and websites. Consequently, many newsgroups have opted to join Weibo, China's largest social media platform (Xu et al., 2023). By registering accounts and posting news on Weibo for free, these news organizations leverage their existing credibility and influence to attract users' attention (Plantin & de Seta, 2019). Initially, many news media simply replicated content from their original channels to Weibo, failing to fully exploit the communication advantages offered by social media (Tong & Zuo, 2016). However, as the media environment and technology evolved, mainstream media in China, such as *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television, gradually expanded their range of innovations in Weibo news including news genres, expressions, presentation forms, and content (Jian & Liu, 2018; Wang, 2022).

People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC), holds significant influence as a traditional media organization in China. Its official entry into Weibo took place on July 22, 2012, with a post titled "Beijing, Go." Over eleven years, the Weibo account of *People's Daily* (@Peoplesdaily) has attracted far more followers than any other media account, exceeding 150 million (Zhang et al., 2023). Bolsover (2013) discovered that news published by *People's Daily* and other news publishers on Weibo often generate extensive public engagement, including many reposts and replies. Therefore, @Peoplesdaily best represents traditional Chinese news media's digital practices and social media innovations.

Given the evolving communication environment, media technology, and user habits, innovation and development have emerged as critical issues for many news media organizations (Eldridge et al., 2019; Wagemans et al., 2019). This article utilizes the media context theory of Meyrowitz (1985) as a framework and employs textual analysis to analyze the innovative practices of *People's Daily* on Weibo. To distill the practices that hold value for current and future media, the study focuses on the ongoing and recent innovations that @Peoplesdaily has adopted. At the theoretical level, this article will reinforce the applicability of media context theory to social media and depict the hybrid situation and changing trends of the social media news context. At the practical level, this article will distill @Peoplesdaily's innovative communication experiences on social media and raise generalizable strategies and recommendations. These recommendations will be available to news media in various countries to help them better adapt and develop their social media news operations (Bao et al., 2021; Vu, 2014).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Media Context Theory in the Age of Social Media

Meyrowitz (1985) published *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, and provided a comprehensive exposition of media context theory. In media context theory, the so-called context refers to information systems (Meyrowitz, 1985). Information systems blur the boundaries between the private and public contexts, resulting in corresponding changes in people's social behaviors and roles (Ilan, 2022; Meyrowitz, 1990). Influenced by Goffman's mimesis, and the media studies of Innes and McLuhan

(Silverstone, 1999), media context theory emphasizes that electronic media and the social context interact (Meyrowitz, 1985). It points out that any factor that can change the structure of the social stage or reorganize the social audience can significantly impact social behavior (Meyrowitz, 1990). What's more, contextualization refers to reinterpreting and disseminating symbolic material from one media context to another (Gruber et al., 2023; Gumperz, 1992). Contextualization can be used to describe the state of content production and dissemination in the media and can be used to explain how the media builds up context and exerts influence on society and audiences (Dahlberg, 2015; De Wolf, 2020). For example, the headline of a news article might cite a movie scene, mixing the movie context with the news context, thus triggering greater audience attention and empathy (Rameshbhai & Paulose, 2019).

Although media context theory was proposed based on the context of television media, it provides an appropriate perspective to understand the relationship between different types of media and society (Meyrowitz, 1985). According to media context theory, the more blurred the boundary between media and reality, the more likely it is that context crossover and integration will occur (Arnaboldi et al., 2017; Fortunati et al., 2003). In the current age of social media, thanks to the increasingly close relationship and blurred boundaries between media and society (Jurgenson, 2019), the idea of media context theory, instead of becoming obsolete, has gained more comprehensive application (Marwick, 2013). Badham and Mykkänen (2022) argued that the interaction between the media and the general public has been transformed on social media, making social dialogue more accessible and frequent. Public discourse is increasingly integrated into mainstream media and has the potential to lead public opinion to some extent (Barberá et al., 2019; Gorodnichenko et al., 2021). In the era dominated by radio or television, the media reshaped the concept of physical locations by replacing them with information systems, blurring geographical boundaries (Meyrowitz, 1993). In the age of social media, the media and the human body coexist in the same geographic space and move in tandem, allowing for potential intersections between media and natural scenes (Qvortrup, 2006). The mediated and natural scenes interact more frequently, and the boundary between them is no longer solely defined by differences in information access, but rather by the nature of the information itself (Ilan, 2022). The penetration and influence of mediated context becomes ubiquitous on social media, implicitly transforming the form and content of the social context and exerting an influence on people's perceptions, emotions, and behaviors (Ilan, 2022; Torous et al., 2021).

In the age of social media, the media context and the reality context are not only interactive and permeable, they can even co-create hybrid contexts through deep integration (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Meyrowitz (1990) introduced the concept of the "middle region" to describe the changes in contexts and behaviors brought about by new media, building upon Goffman's theory of "front stage" and "backstage." Essentially, the middle region is a hybrid context, and the emergence of new behaviors in hybrid contexts can be referred to as middle region behaviors (Meyrowitz, 1994). Increasingly, news organizations are beginning to conduct news production and dissemination activities in hybrid contexts (Lee & Tandoc, 2017), and these middle region behaviors erode the traditional distinction between the front and backstage (Hogan, 2010). On the one hand, some news production and dissemination behaviors are shifted to the middle region of social media, impacting the boundary between the front and backstage. For example, in the case of journalists producing personalized video-blogs when reporting the Wuhan lockdown during Covid-19, audiences can see both the front and backstage of news production through video (Meng & Wang, 2023). On the other hand, audiences can reach the middle region and interact with news producers instantly. For example, in live network news programs, audiences can participate in news production through video

barrages or comments, including asking reporters to respond to questions or switch cameras (Engstrom et al., 2022). As the framework of this article, media context theory acts as a guide to focus on *People's Daily's* middle region behaviors in social media and explore the news production and dissemination strategies that lead to changes in both the media and reality contexts.

2.2. Innovations of *People's Daily* on Weibo

In the early days of the *People's Daily's* registration on Weibo, some scholars argued that its move onto Weibo was an innovation in itself (Noesselt, 2014). Zhang and Lei (2013) argued that the opening of @Peoplesdaily signaled that the CPC's official newspaper was presenting the features of commercial media, and to some extent, it had diluted the color of its political ideology and achieved communication with netizens. Over the subsequent 10 years, many scholars have studied the news published by @Peoplesdaily from different perspectives, aiming to analyze the innovation strategies of traditional news media in the social media era (Deng et al., 2021). Most of these existing studies analyzed communication strategies in the context of specific events or topics, with small sample sizes and mainly cross-sectional surveys (Huang & Wang, 2013). Although these case studies focused on @Peoplesdaily's specific practices in social media and failed to summarize the overall trends behind different content production and communication strategies, they still depicted the path of @Peoplesdaily's transformation from seriousness to accessibility (Pang et al., 2022).

Some existing studies have explored the differences and similarities between the news of @Peoplesdaily and *People's Daily* newspaper (Wu & Pan, 2022). In terms of similarities, some studies have found that both @Peoplesdaily and *People's Daily* newspaper follow the same values and positions, and together, they play a vital role in leading Chinese public opinion (Zhang et al., 2023). Both @Peoplesdaily and *People's Daily* newspaper consider the state's logic and the people's logic in the content and expression of news, with an increasing focus on evoking positive emotions (Pang et al., 2022). For example, they work together to provide important news and comfort the public during sudden disasters (Shi & Luo, 2015). In terms of differences, many scholars have suggested that news of @Peoplesdaily presents greater characteristics of timely information dissemination, rich and diversified content, proactive voices, and folksy expression (Huang & Wang, 2013). It has been found that Weibo news spreads at a faster pace than traditional channels (Xu et al., 2023). Social media's advent has diversified news production in *People's Daily*, blurring the boundaries between news producers and audiences (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). @Peoplesdaily can utilize public comments and feedback as indicators for adjusting their news production efforts (Pang et al., 2022). It coincides with some of the ideas in media context theory.

Other studies have analyzed the strategies and effects of the @Peoplesdaily's news in more detail. With the background of the early establishment of @Peoplesdaily's account, Huang and Lu (2017) found that @Peoplesdaily enriches news content and shifts the reporting approach from the traditional model of "delivering to ordinary audiences" to the model of "ordinary people telling their own stories," using informal language to attract audiences. Taking @Peoplesdaily's news on the Tangshan restaurant attack as an example, An et al. (2023) found that its strategies are primarily based on thematic framing, actively embracing unofficial discourse space, and allowing for the emergence of diverse voices and expressions. By analyzing 36 online news items from the *People's Daily*, Wu and Pan (2022) thought that @Peoplesdaily adopts strategies such as emphasizing proximity, personalization, positivity, and human interest in news

values to engage audiences. In the context of the sinking of the Eastern Star, Shi and Luo (2015) argued that @Peoplesdaily combines the content production capability of newspapers with the information presentation advantages of Weibo, resulting in favorable effects in reporting breaking events. These studies summarized many of @Peoplesdaily's innovative strategies, but due to their specific research context and restricted sample size, the strategies identified are difficult to generalize to a comprehensive journalistic practice (Wallace, 2018). Still, their experience inspired this article in terms of how to generalize @Peoplesdaily's news practices regarding news interactivity, framing, presentation, and communication.

3. Methods

The development of social media has brought about a dynamically changing communication context (Kent et al., 2017), which has forced many traditional media to innovate (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020). This article examines the innovation experiences of traditional Chinese news media in social media by using @Peoplesdaily's news as samples. *People's Daily*, as the official newspaper of the CPC, the media account with the largest number of followers on the Weibo platform (Zhang et al., 2023), and one of the most important media outlets in China, *People's Daily* has been a pioneer of media innovation in the digital era. Taking @Peoplesdaily as the research object can explore the most "Chinese characteristics" of traditional Chinese media's innovation experience in social media and ensure the representativeness of the research findings.

3.1. Sample Collection and Analysis

During the analysis process, we first collected all Weibo posts posted by @Peoplesdaily from July 2013 to December 2022 ($N = 131,120$). Second, the researchers conducted a stratified sampling of Weibo posts, sampling 5% of Weibo posts ($N = 6,556$) equally spaced by post time. Third, the researchers read and analyzed these Weibo posts to isolate @Peoplesdaily's news ($N = 2,452$, see Section 2.2 for exclusion criteria) with innovative features. These 2,452 Weibo posts are the valid sample for this article. Fourth, the first author of this study conducted textual analysis to examine the valid samples in terms of form, content, expression, and genre. The innovative strategies of the samples were then documented provided after the samples, such as spoken news expressions, using webcasts, brief news commentary, and providing non-news content, etc. The other two authors of this study checked the marked innovative strategies. Finally, the researchers discussed and analyzed the annotated results of the text analysis and summarized the communication strategies of @Peoplesdaily.

3.2. Exclusion Criteria for Samples

Previous research showed that the news of @Peoplesdaily achieved great success by implementing numerous innovations in form, content, expression, and genre (Wu & Pan, 2022). However, some initiatives, although popular for a while, no longer apply to today's communication context. To perform sample cleaning and summarize the strategies that are still viable in the present, we have only included the samples with the following characteristics: (a) The Weibo must reflect @Peoplesdaily's unique and innovative strategy, not the old one used by the *People's Daily* newspaper; (b) innovative strategies in Weibo which have not gone out of style and are still frequently used by @Peoplesdaily in the last three years; (c) strategies in Weibo which are innovative and can provide valuable insights for other media outlets.

4. Findings

Guided by media context theory, this article summarizes three aspects of @Peoplesdaily's middle region behaviors and contextualization strategies: middle regionalization of news contexts; personalized production of important news; and equal dialogue with the public. By demonstrating and interpreting typical cases below, it is possible to explore the contextualization strategies and experiences of China's traditional news media (*People's Daily*) in social media (Weibo).

4.1. Middle Regionalization of News' Contexts

By broadcasting news as live news, vlog news, and chat box news, @Peoplesdaily has blurred the boundaries between the news backend and the public and constructed many middle regions. In these middle-region news contexts, @Peoplesdaily carries out a large number of news communication activities to reduce the psychological distance between the audience and @Peoplesdaily.

4.1.1. Live News

People's Daily's live news on the Weibo platform differs significantly from live TV news broadcasts. Traditional live TV newscasts have distinct journalistic boundaries. They require pre-scheduling in a news program, where the subject matter, presenter, location, connecting journalists, and duration are all designed and confirmed in advance. As a result, the producers precisely control the front and backend of the news, and the audience only receives news content that has been designed. However, live news on Weibo has relatively fewer clear boundaries, with the production and dissemination of news taking place in the middle zone. Weibo's live news belongs to a kind of webcasting, which is more approachable and not limited by the production scene. @Peoplesdaily's live newscasts have a civilian perspective, allowing viewers to interact with live reporters at any time through comments and video barrages.

The duration of live news by @Peoplesdaily varies, ranging from a few minutes to a few hours. It encompasses a wide range of types, including political, social, economic, science and technology, and sports news, among others. As early as 2016, @Peoplesdaily started broadcasting live news on Weibo and offered free live playback for its audiences. During the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 2016, @Peoplesdaily conducted several live broadcasts to disseminate the conferences' resolutions. In 2017, @Peoplesdaily once again live-streamed the entire launch of the Long March 5 Remote Rocket, which took a long time to report the whole event in detail without any pictures or sound being edited, attracting a large number of viewers. Despite the less polished visuals and occasionally shaky footage, the live news is more likely to capture the public's attention and gain their trust due to its novelty news contexts.

4.1.2. Vlog News

From 2019–2023, during the NPC and CPPCC, journalists from *People's Daily* documented the work of filming the conference from a first-person perspective (including the entire process of preparing at home, waiting for the venue, filming the conferences, and editing the footage, etc.), and posted vlog news on Weibo. Traditionally, journalism is embedded in the performative nature of the front stage, and vlog news

breaks down the distinction between the front and back stages. Vlog news follows the logic of life, and does not alter the form, sequence, or content of news events. It aims to record the process and details of the reporter's participation in the news event, and to lead the audiences to enter the news events and behind the scenes from the first-person perspective.

In the early years, the topics of vlog news published by @Peoplesdaily were mainly political news, and then gradually expanded to social news, sports news, and other areas. For important events such as the Chang'e Five launch in 2020, the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, and the Boao Forum for Asia in 2022, much of the news has been reported in vlogs. The vlog news focuses on the news event while exposing the stories of journalists in front of the stage and behind the scenes. The sharing of time and space between journalists and audiences aligns with Meyrowitz's "middle region" theory, and the new communication scenarios greatly stimulate the public's interest in watching. Although these vlogs differ in genre and duration, they all share the core feature of a first-person perspective.

4.1.3. Chat Box News

In 2017, @Peoplesdaily launched a #Letters to Young People campaign during the 19th National Congress of the CPC, sending messages to its followers for eight consecutive days via Weibo chat box. The eight days of chat box news were "editorials" written by the *People's Daily's* Commentary Department and other departments, and centered around Chinese youth-related issues, including patriotism, career choices, health, etc. These chat box news days received favorable responses from young people due to their novel format and friendly expression. Sending news directly from the back office to the public's chat box is a break from the multiple traditional boundaries surrounding the news production and distribution processes.

Some studies have argued that young Chinese are under tremendous pressure in their careers and lives, and many cannot find the time and energy to pay attention to national events (Lyu, 2012). To attract their attention to national issues, @Peoplesdaily customizes news content that young people care about, so that they know that these issues are closely related to the country's development. @Peoplesdaily takes an egalitarian stance and sends news to its followers via a Weibo chat box. Chat box news can also be perceived in terms of the performer (@Peoplesdaily) being influenced by the reactions of its audiences (Chinese public) and adjusting its news communication behavior.

4.2. Personalized Production of Important News

To cover some important issues, @Peoplesdaily launched Weibo commentary and news jointly produced with users. These two forms of journalism further expand the middle regions, allowing news content and audience discourse to interact and even transform each other in these regions.

4.2.1. Weibo Commentary

In response to current affairs of public concern, @Peoplesdaily has launched a new form of news—Weibo commentary, which is less than 140 Chinese characters and mainly focuses on social, political, legal, and cultural issues. Weibo commentaries are expressed in a very approachable way; some have even begun to use internet buzzwords in recent years. For example, the Weibo commentary "what does it say about six

academicians teaching one course?” told the story of academics teaching, the enlightenment they bring, and called on universities to pay attention to the quality of teaching. It used the colloquial word “cow’s nose” (which means the key point or part as the Chinese proverb goes “if you lead a cow, you should lead it by its nose”) and the internet buzzword “bird course” (which refers to a course that is unimportant or has no substance). Compared to serious and formal traditional editorials, these Weibo commentaries are more likely to attract audiences with their colloquial language:

What does it say about six academicians teaching one course? Wuhan University has six academicians teaching one course. The lineup is impressive. This story demonstrates the responsibility of academicians. They are teaching rigorously, but also informatively. No wonder the students feel “classes are as fun as watching a TV show.” Undergraduate education is the colleges’ and universities’ “cow’s nose.” Academics and professors should teach more classes to undergraduates. Don’t let “bird course” be in school.

4.2.2. News Jointly Produced With Users

In some important feature stories, @Peoplesdaily guided the public to follow the news and participate in the discussion by creating Weibo topics. During the 19th National Congress of the CPC in 2017, @Peoplesdaily created the topic #I Love You China, attracting tens of thousands of netizens to leave messages in the Weibo square, “I’m a fan of the motherland for life.” In 2018, during the NPC and CPPCC, @Peoplesdaily created the topic #China is Excellent, attracting many netizens to speak “your strength makes me never lack security.” In 2019, on the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, @Peoplesdaily once again created the topics #30 Days of Showing Love to China and #China Has Me. These topics bolstered Chinese national pride, achieving the spread of patriotic sentiment.

In addition to creating Weibo topics to attract the public to discuss together, @Peoplesdaily also places netizens’ notable comments on posters (these posters have brightly colored backgrounds and netizens’ comments are prominently placed in the middle of the poster). In 2017, @Peoplesdaily published several Weibo posts to celebrate the 96th anniversary of the founding of the CPC. It made posters of the most popular comments, which were individually sent out on Weibo. These posters triggered emotionally solid resonance among the public, garnering 121,000 reposts and 23,000 comments. Obviously, the content of netizens’ comments provided @Peoplesdaily with material for news production. @Peoplesdaily not only uses the public’s discourse as material for news production, it also uses the public’s speech to support some of their points of view, realizing the mutual transformation of public discourse and news discourse.

4.3. Equal Dialogue With the Public

Through daily greetings, holiday greetings, and popularizing science, @Peoplesdaily communicates and interacts with its audience on an equal footing. These types of content further break down the boundaries between the front and backstage of the news, shaping a hybrid context filled with warmth. They also have become a means for @Peoplesdaily to evoke the public’s positive emotions and calm the public in the face of life pressures.

4.3.1. Daily Greeting

@Peoplesdaily's greetings sever the boundaries between news coverage and public life to a certain extent. Every morning, @Peoplesdaily posts Weibo greetings to its followers. Weibo posts of the morning greetings are short, primarily inspirational quotes or life truths, encouraging audiences to work (or study) optimistically, and cultivate healthy habits and hobbies. For example, the audience is exhorted to be grateful, down-to-earth in life, and progressive and friendly in work. In order to make these inspirational messages more attractive, @Peoplesdaily also makes the texts into posters for distribution.

@Peoplesdaily set up a special Night Reading section to send out good night greetings to its followers. Weibo posts of good night greetings are long, often exceeding 1,000 Chinese characters. These Weibo posts are primarily short stories that contain philosophies about life with both text and audio versions. Many audiences commented that listening to (reading) the Night Reading programs of @Peoplesdaily before bed can help them calm down and fall asleep better.

4.3.2. Holiday Greeting

@Peoplesdaily is very good at finding the "meaning" of each festival, searching for festival elements from real-world landscapes, objects, and customs, and delivering visual festival greetings to the public. To entertain the public on national holidays such as Labor Day, National Day, and New Year's Day, @Peoplesdaily posts many exciting videos and live broadcasts introducing China's scenic spots. During some important traditional festivals (e.g., Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, etc.), @Peoplesdaily will send out greetings to the public, and briefly describe the customs and the histories of the traditional festivals through beautiful pictures or videos (e.g., during the Dragon Boat Festival, it will report on the different flavors of rice dumplings). When the seasons change, @Peoplesdaily also publishes photos and videos of landscapes in season (e.g., showing the public the opening of rapeseed flowers and cherry blossoms when spring comes, and revealing the beauty of maple trees and ginkgo trees in autumn). It delivers beautiful scenery and greetings to every audience, allowing the public to escape life's stresses briefly.

4.3.3. Popularizing Science

@Peoplesdaily also plays the role of "life teacher" for the public, delivering scientific knowledge by publishing Weibo posts. The topics covered in popular science Weibo posts include science and technology, health knowledge, astronomical phenomena, etc. For instance, during the Covid-19 outbreak from 2019 to 2022, @Peoplesdaily published numerous Weibo posts to popularise accurate prevention and treatment measures for Covid-19. These Weibo posts have gone a long way in calming public anxiety and curbing the spread of some disinformation. Furthermore, @Peoplesdaily frequently invites experts and scholars from relevant fields to produce popular science videos. For example, on World Sleep Day 2023, @Peoplesdaily invited senior doctors to explain the causes and countermeasures of insomnia in a Weibo video. Many users have commented that the expert's advice does help to improve the stress in their lives and the quality of their sleep.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article adopts the media context theory proposed by Meyrowitz as its framework and summarizes the innovation experiences of a pre-eminent traditional Chinese news media organization (*People's Daily*) on the social media platform Weibo. Compared with the “serious big newspaper” impression left by the *People's Daily* newspaper, @Peoplesdaily is more likely to use the reporting methods that netizens enjoy. It shows an innovative journalism strategy of “contextualization,” whether when releasing information or elaborating opinions. All of these strategies break down, to a certain extent, the partition between the front and back stages of news (i.e., the boundary between news production and public life), allowing the news and the public to interact and communicate in the middle region.

As a traditional Chinese news media organization, *People's Daily* uses social media platforms to create new products such as live news, vlog news, chat box news, Weibo commentary, and news jointly produced with users. These works start with the decentralization of discourse. Then, through the “middle region” of the communication context and the personalized creation of important news, @Peoplesdaily builds a closer relationship with the audiences, consolidating or reconstructing their authority and influence. Ultimately, while the public participates in constructing the news context, @Peoplesdaily achieves the reclamation of discourse.

The expansion and reshaping of the @Peoplesdaily's discourse is due to its news innovation and division of labor. On the one hand, @Peoplesdaily continuously creates “middle regions” through live news, vlog news, and chat box news, absorbing much public/personal discourse. Zhang et al. (2014) found through a large-scale survey that *People's Daily* is regarded as the most credible media outlet by the Chinese public. The live news, vlog news, and chat box news published by @Peoplesdaily has transformed the inherent seriousness and monotonous context of the past and allows multiple languages and words in front and backstage to mix and weave together to present a “hybrid context.” The coexistence of front and backstage “hybrid context” creates a new way of presenting news, i.e., the “middle region” presentation. On the other hand, @Peoplesdaily has taken the public/personal discourse of the “middle region” into its own power through Weibo commentary and news jointly produced with the user. According to Meyrowitz (1994), discourse is diffused and shifted in the “hybrid context” created by the internet. On social media platforms such as Weibo, individual discourse gradually enters the mainstream, and the public sphere changes its expression into individual discourse to cater to the public and the market, contributing to a new form of official discourse. This idea aligns with the reality of Weibo commentary and news jointly produced with users by @Peoplesdaily. @Peoplesdaily has changed the old model of “you broadcast, and I watch” to one that encourages audience interaction (Huang & Lu, 2017). It pays close attention to users' real-time discussions and comments on social issues. At the same time, it takes the audience's speech as a news source, and selectively displays the users' comments, borrowing these to support its reports and opinions. It can be seen that @Peoplesdaily has consolidated and reconstructed its discourse power in a “hybrid context” through innovation and cooperation in news production. Audience participation does not decrease the authority of @Peoplesdaily but becomes a source of influence for it.

Multiple studies have indicated that official Chinese propaganda outlets have achieved a delicate balance between positive and negative emotions to evoke emotional resonance and creative engagement (Zhang, 2022). The findings of this article further confirm this view. Through daily greetings, holiday greetings, and popularizing science, @Peoplesdaily communicates with the public on an equal footing. @Peoplesdaily not

only plays the role of a news publisher, but also assumes the role of a social governor. It constructs a hybrid context full of goodwill to regulate the public's life stress and emotions.

As Liu and Zhou (2011) noted, although the Weibo accounts of Chinese state media serve as a tool to capture the public voice, a platform to collect sources, and a channel to obtain social news, they also serve as propaganda tools to facilitate the spread of positive news and manage crises. As China's largest newspaper, *People's Daily* has always been involved in China's social governance in different ways. Previously, official social media accounts, such as *People's Daily* and China Central Television, often served as the voice of government or administrative institutions (Li & Liu, 2020). As a result, *People's Daily* has carried its authority over to Weibo, providing serious and objective reporting to the public. Over time, @Peoplesdaily has gradually shifted from "tough propaganda" to "emotional mobilization" in social governance work. The discourse of @Peoplesdaily is no longer condescending, and the interaction with society at large is becoming more and more egalitarian (Gorodnichenko et al., 2021). Through equal dialogue with the public, @Peoplesdaily constructs a more diversified media context and plays the role of "friend, teacher, calendar, message board, and so on" for its audiences. In the Weibo posts related to daily greetings, holiday greetings, and popularizing science, much of the content is not news in the traditional sense, but short stories, inspirational quotes, famous people's sayings, and scientific knowledge. These non-news messages published by @Peoplesdaily convey the core values of Chinese society and are the primary means by which *People's Daily* participates in social governance today.

6. Implications

This article has tried to overcome the previous case studies' limitations of small sample sizes and poor generalizable conclusions to summarize and analyze @Peoplesdaily's communication strategies from a contextualized perspective.

Theoretically, this article develops the application of media context theory in social media. The article finds that the states of backstage, middle region (hybrid context), and front stage still exist in news reporting on social media. However, as more and more social media news emphasizes interaction and communication, the middle region is becoming more common.

Practically, this article finds that the "contextualization" strategies employed by *People's Daily's* Weibo news offer important experiences for traditional news organizations' integration strategies into social media. Based on the results, we encourage other traditional news media to open accounts on various social media platforms, leveraging them for news dissemination and fostering news' innovations. The specific journalistic practice recommendations include the following four points.

Firstly, we believe that the strategy of "contextualization" employed by *People's Daily's* Weibo news is replicable. @Peoplesdaily utilizes formats such as live news, vlog news, chat box news, Weibo commentary, and news jointly produced with users to create "hybrid context/middle regions." It then achieves an expansion and reconfiguration of discursive power. Other news organizations on social media can imitate @Peoplesdaily's innovative initiatives to create a more diversified communication context, absorb the audience's discourse and attention, and ultimately enhance their influence.

Second, we emphasize the importance of “interaction” in the future of news media. In the social media hybrid context, news and public communication become more and more frequent. Interaction is a prerequisite for a change in the communication context (Barberá et al., 2019) and a key for news organizations to gain attention. We argue that news organizations need to be aware of the influence of public/personal discourse in the media context and actively engage the public in the discussion to expand the communicative power of news.

Third, we believe that “non-news content” may be the key to future innovation and development for news media. @Peoplesdaily, by providing non-news content such as short stories, inspirational quotes, and scientific knowledge, has changed the initially serious and monotonous communication context, and attracted a large audience (e.g., those who had got used to listening to books while going to bed began to use the audio of the Night Reading program of @Peoplesdaily; Wu & Pan, 2022). We encourage other news media to provide their audiences with interesting, informative educational and cultural content, where appropriate, to enhance audience engagement.

Fourth, we believe that news organizations that are present on social media must still maintain their original credibility and do their social duty as news media. The journalistic field is never autonomous from external forces, including audiences as critics (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022; Craft et al., 2016). In addition, news accounts on social media are more susceptible to the influence of funders and the public. Therefore, we call on the news media not to be obsessed with traffic and attention, but to provide objective and neutral news to the public and fulfill their social monitoring and accountability roles.

7. Limitations

In this article, we have selected @Peoplesdaily as a representative source to explore the experiences of Chinese traditional news media in social media innovation. While the sample chosen is highly influential and showcases significant innovations, it is essential to acknowledge that the social media innovation strategies of smaller and medium-sized traditional news media may have been overlooked. In future studies, we intend to expand the sample size moderately to include a broader range of news organizations, thereby exploring more Chinese news media’s innovative experiences.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Raquel Silva and Andreia Serra, Academic Editors Scott Eldridge (University of Groningen), Frank Harbers (University of Groningen), and Sandra Banjac (University of Groningen), and the reviewers for their valuable support.

Funding

This article has been supported by the Anhui University National Language Promotion Base Research Project (2022YY15) and by the Humanities and Social Science Research Project of Universities in Anhui Province (SK2020A0014).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- An, Y., Cai, S., Zhong, H., & Zhou, Z. (2023). Research on official media coverage and communication mode on different SNS platforms: Taking People's Daily's report on Tangshan restaurant attack as an example. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 13, 196–204. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v13i.7894>
- Arnaboldi, M., Azzone, G., & Sidorova, Y. (2017). Governing social media: The emergence of hybridised boundary objects. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 30(4), 821–849. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-07-2015-2132>
- Badham, M., & Mykkänen, M. (2022). A relational approach to how media engage with their audiences in social media. *Media and Communication*, 10(1), 54–65. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4409>
- Banjac, S., & Hanusch, F. (2022). A question of perspective: Exploring audiences' views of journalistic boundaries. *New Media & Society*, 24(3), 705–723. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820963795>
- Bao, T., Liang, B., & Riyanto, Y. E. (2021). Unpacking the negative welfare effect of social media: Evidence from a large scale nationally representative time-use survey in China. *China Economic Review*, 69, Article 101650. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2021.101650>
- Barberá, P., Casas, A., Nagler, J., Egan, P. J., Bonneau, R., Jost, J. T., & Tucker, J. A. (2019). Who leads? Who follows? Measuring issue attention and agenda setting by legislators and the mass public using social media data. *American Political Science Review*, 113(4), 883–901. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000352>
- Belair-Gagnon, V., & Steinke, A. J. (2020). Capturing digital news innovation research in organizations, 1990–2018. *Journalism Studies*, 21(12), 1724–1743. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1789496>
- Bolsover, G. (2013). *News in China's new information environment: Dissemination patterns, opinion leaders and news commentary on Weibo*. SSRN. <http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2257794>
- Bullingham, L., & Vasconcelos, A. C. (2013). "The presentation of self in the online world": Goffman and the study of online identities. *Journal of Information Science*, 39(1), 101–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551512470051>
- Craft, S., Vos, T. P., & David Wolfgang, J. (2016). Reader comments as press criticism: Implications for the journalistic field. *Journalism*, 17(6), 677–693. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915579332>
- Dahlberg, L. (2015). Which social media? A call for contextualization. *Social Media+ Society*, 1(1), 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115578142>
- Deng, W., Hsu, J. H., Löfgren, K., & Cho, W. (2021). Who is leading China's family planning policy discourse in Weibo? A social media text mining analysis. *Policy & Internet*, 13(4), 485–501. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.264>
- De Wolf, R. (2020). Contextualizing how teens manage personal and interpersonal privacy on social media. *New Media & Society*, 22(6), 1058–1075. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819876570>
- Eldridge, S. A., Hess, K., Tandoc, E. C., & Westlund, O. (2019). Navigating the scholarly terrain: Introducing the digital journalism studies compass. *Digital Journalism*, 7(3), 386–403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1599724>
- Engstrom, T., Strong, J., Sullivan, C., & Pole, J. D. (2022). A comparison of Leximancer semi-automated content analysis to Manual Content Analysis: A healthcare exemplar using emotive transcripts of Covid-19 hospital staff interactive webcasts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221118993>
- Fortunati, L., Katz, J. E., & Riccini, R. (Eds.). (2003). *Mediating the human body: Technology, communication, and fashion*. Routledge.
- Gorodnichenko, Y., Pham, T., & Talavera, O. (2021). Social media, sentiment and public opinions: Evidence

- from# Brexit and# USElection. *European Economic Review*, 136, Article 103772. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2021.103772>
- Gruber, H., Haugh, M., & Xie, C. (2023). Recontextualization: Modes, media, and practices. *Frontiers in Communication*, 8, Article 1164897. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1164897>
- Gumperz, J. J. (1992). Contextualization and understanding. *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon*, 11, 229–252.
- Hogan, B. (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(6), 377–386. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610385893>
- Huang, C., & Wang, S. (2013). The interaction between party newspapers and microblogs in the social media environment: Observations based on the sina weibo of the People's Daily. *Journal of China Youth University for Political Sciences*, 32(4), 114–118. <https://doi.org/10.16034/j.cnki.10-1318/c.2013.04.010>
- Huang, L., & Lu, W. (2017). Functions and roles of social media in media transformation in China: A case study of “@ CCTV NEWS.” *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(3), 774–785. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.05.015>
- Ilan, J. (2022). Live and kicking: Digital live broadcasting technologies, participating strangers and news mobility. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 2325–2344. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18498/3763>
- Jian, G., & Liu, T. (2018). Journalist social media practice in China: A review and synthesis. *Journalism*, 19(9/10), 1452–1470. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918778257>
- Jurgenson, N. (2019). *The social photo: On photography and social media*. Verso Books.
- Kent, M., Ellis, K., & Xu, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Chinese social media: Social, cultural, and political implications*. Routledge.
- Lee, E. J., & Tandoc, E. C., Jr. (2017). When news meets the audience: How audience feedback online affects news production and consumption. *Human Communication Research*, 43(4), 436–449. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12123>
- Li, X., & Liu, Q. (2020). Social media use, eHealth literacy, disease knowledge, and preventive behaviors in the Covid-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional study on Chinese netizens. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(10), Article e19684. <https://doi.org/10.2196/19684>
- Liu, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2011, May 31–June 3). Social media in China: Rising Weibo in government. In J.-J. Lee & M. W. Küster (Eds.), *5th IEEE International Conference on Digital Ecosystems and Technologies* (pp. 213–219). IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/DEST.2011.5936628>
- Lyu, J. C. (2012). How young Chinese depend on the media during public health crises? A comparative perspective. *Public Relations Review*, 38(5), 799–806. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17473610710838608>
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale University Press.
- Meng, J., & Wang, H. (2023). Performing transparency in vlog news: Self-disclosure of Chinese journalists in vlog reporting on Covid-19. *Journalism Practice*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2023.2169189>
- Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. Oxford University Press.
- Meyrowitz, J. (1990). Redefining the situation: Extending dramaturgy into a theory of social change and media effects. In S. Riggins (Ed.), *Beyond Goffman: Studies on communication, institution, and social interaction* (pp. 65–97). Mouton de Gruyter.
- Meyrowitz, J. (1993). Images of media: Hidden ferment—And harmony—In the field. *Journal of Communication*, 43(3), 55–66.

- Meyrowitz, J. (1994). Medium theory. In D. Crowley & D. Mitchell (Eds.), *Communication theory today* (pp. 50–77). Polity Press.
- Noesselt, N. (2014). Microblogs and the adaptation of the Chinese Party-State's governance strategy. *Governance*, 27(3), 449–468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12045>
- Pang, H., Liu, J., & Lu, J. (2022). Tackling fake news in socially mediated public spheres: A comparison of Weibo and WeChat. *Technology in Society*, 70, Article 102004. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2022.102004>
- Plantin, J. C., & de Seta, G. (2019). WeChat as infrastructure: The techno-nationalist shaping of Chinese digital platforms. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(3), 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1572633>
- Qvortrup, L. (2006). Understanding new digital media: Medium theory or complexity theory? *European Journal of Communication*, 21(3), 345–356. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323106066639>
- Rameshbhai, C. J., & Paulose, J. (2019). Opinion mining on newspaper headlines using SVM and NLP. *International Journal of Electrical and Computer Engineering*, 9(3), 2152–2163. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijece.v9i3.pp.20152-2163>
- Shi, L., & Luo, C. (2015). Micro-interaction of newspaper and micro-interaction of breaking news: The case of People's Daily's coverage of "Eastern Star" sinking incident. *Journalism and Mass Communication*, 17, 39–43. <https://doi.org/10.15897/j.cnki.cn51-1046/g2.2015.17.007>
- Silverstone, R. (1999). What's new about new media? Introduction. *New Media & Society*, 1(1), 10–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444899001001002>
- SOHU. (2018). *China media industry development report 2018*. https://www.sohu.com/na/237156451_654813
- Tong, J., & Zuo, L. (2016). Weibo communication and government legitimacy in China: A computer-assisted analysis of Weibo messages on two "mass incidents." In W. Chen (Ed.), *The internet, social networks and civic engagement in Chinese societies* (pp. 76–95). Routledge.
- Torous, J., Bucci, S., Bell, I. H., Kessing, L. V., Faurholt-Jepsen, M., Whelan, P., Carvalho, A. F., Keshavan, M., Linardon, J., & Firth, J. (2021). The growing field of digital psychiatry: Current evidence and the future of apps, social media, chatbots, and virtual reality. *World Psychiatry*, 20(3), 318–335. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20883>
- Vu, H. T. (2014). The online audience as gatekeeper: The influence of reader metrics on news editorial selection. *Journalism*, 15(8), 1094–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913504259>
- Wagemans, A., Witschge, T., & Harbers, F. (2019). Impact as driving force of journalistic and social change. *Journalism*, 20(4), 552–567. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146488491877053>
- Wallace, J. (2018). Modelling contemporary gatekeeping: The rise of individuals, algorithms and platforms in digital news dissemination. *Digital Journalism*, 6(3), 274–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1343648>
- Wang, H. (2022). Transformation or continuation? Comparing journalism in digital and legacy media in China. *Journalism Practice*, 16(7), 1431–1448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1870528>
- Wang, H. (2023). *Disrupting Chinese journalism: Changing politics, economics, and journalistic practices of the legacy newspaper press*. Routledge.
- Wu, G., & Pan, C. (2022). Audience engagement with news on Chinese social media: A discourse analysis of the People's Daily official account on WeChat. *Discourse & Communication*, 16(1), 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813211026567>
- Xu, J., Guo, D., Xu, J., & Luo, C. (2023). How do multiple actors conduct science communication about Omicron on Weibo: A mixed-method study. *Media and Communication*, 11(1), 306–322. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i1.6122>

- Zhang, C. (2022). Contested disaster nationalism in the digital age: Emotional registers and geopolitical imaginaries in Covid-19 narratives on Chinese social media. *Review of International Studies*, 48(2), 219–242. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210522000018>
- Zhang, C., Zhang, D., & Shao, H. L. (2023). The softening of Chinese digital propaganda: Evidence from the People's Daily Weibo account during the pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1049671. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1049671>
- Zhang, H., Zhou, S., & Shen, B. (2014). Public trust: A comprehensive investigation on perceived media credibility in China. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 24(2), 158–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2013.856452>
- Zhang, Z., & Lei, J. (2013). Transmitting positive energy of mainstream media in summoning the masses—On the transformation of the language communication mode of Weibo version of People's Daily. *China Publishing Journal*, 9, 34–36.

About the Authors



Difan Guo is a doctoral candidate at the School of Journalism and Communication, Beijing Normal University. He is also a visiting scholar at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University. His research interests include data science, digital journalism, science communication, and health communication.



Haiyan Wang is an associate professor in the Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Macau. She is the author of *Disrupting Chinese Journalism: Changing Politics, Economics and Journalistic Practices of the Legacy Newspaper Press* (2023, Routledge), and *The Transformation of Investigative Journalism in China: From Journalists to Activists* (2016, Lexington Books).



Jinghong Xu is a professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, Beijing Normal University. His research interests include new media and internet governance, health communication, intercultural communication, film and television study, and game research.