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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perceptions of media functions and processing of news: analysis of audience in a Chinese metropolis

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Audience members carry expectations and judgment of media prior to using them. On the assumption that perceptions have broad socio-political antecedents and audience cognitive consequences, this study specifies a model to examine the relationships among social demographics, perceived media functions and evaluation of media performance, attention to newspaper and television news, and information processing strategies. Telephone interviews of a probability sample of 1000 Guangzhou residents provided first-hand data for analyses. We found that media judgment and information processing are multi-dimensional concepts and their theoretical connections are non-trivial. Variances in media assessment made no difference in people's habit of reading between the lines, but predicted differentially to critical and non-reflective reading of media content.

Keywords: media effect; survey; mainland China; information theories

Introduction

As research on China's media accumulates, the direction of empirical studies on effects has branched out into two broad and yet distinct paths. One seeks macro-level explanations of audience behaviors in the tradition of political economy. The other builds theories at micro-level, connecting news content and recipients' cognitive activities within the general framework of social psychology. The division, convenient as it may be to disciplinary identity, risks separating what is integral and creating rifts where convergence is called for.

There is, however, a third and qualitative path of studies stemming from the burgeoning interest in cultural studies and critical scholarship to seek explanations of media effects in China by closely examining the contributions of specific social and historical context to the unique discursive manifestations of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals and collectives. Research of this persuasion tends to see audience activities as socially structured and culturally patterned.

Theoretically informed by these three distinct lines of thought, this paper makes an attempt at empirically linking cognitive attributes of audience with functions of media, and both with the larger process of social transition in China. Our model addresses two interrelated questions: (1) how political-economic configurations of the media industry engender *perceptions* of its functions on the part of audience

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members; and (2) how these perceptions generate information processing *responses* to media content and the changing message system.

Mass media operate in social systems. As institutions, they are locked into a web of intimate relationships of mutual dependency with other organizations (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), a closely-knit tie where reciprocal fulfillment of needs forms the basis of co-existence (e.g., Turow, 1997). As such, media's institutional arrangement and symbolic and material resource allocation correspond neatly to categories of a community's power structure (see Berkowitz, 1997, for a review). On the reception end, however, individuals formulate their own tacit assumptions, mini-theories, typologies, and habits of selection to cope with the sheer amount of information competing for attention.

Patterns of information processing mainly involve instantaneous retrieval of structured mental responses from existing schemata repertoires. Admittedly, the formation and formulation of these responses are themselves partially a function of media socialization throughout the life cycle. Upon exposure, people base their use, indeed judgment, of media on these perceptual biases in conjunction with their social anchoring and personal needs as reasons for expecting gratification (e.g., Blumler & Katz, 1974) and for adopting specific information processing strategies. Perceived media functions thus could act as one of the multiple links bridging micro-cognitive activities and the macro-social environment.

In China, where mass media are canonized as apparatus, official definitions of media public service naturally tilt toward domination rather than the dominated. Knowledge of this discursive imbalance leaves the general public with little alternative but to approach media content with skepticism and a readiness for critique. The mainland Chinese audience routinely contrasts what is rhetorically official and what is detectably hidden in media content. Ironically, the particular mode of reception is no less true today than it was during the Mao era, despite the seeming chaos stemming from market orientation and commercialization (Lynch, 1999; Huang & Han, 1997). This duality revolves around tensions between expectations of 'what media ought to do' and evaluations of 'what media do'.

Study context: media functions in China

Previous research on China's media reform has produced an amalgam of insights and perspectives, in terms of trends of development (e.g., Guo & Chen, 1998; Zhao, 2000) and professional operations (e.g., Chan, Lee, & Pan, 2006; Chen, Zhu, & Wu, 1998; Lu & Pan, 2002; Pan, 1997; Zhu & He, 2002). By far, the focus of scholarly attention is set on contradictions between market economy and political control. One conceptual locus is how far some media venture out of the established universe of discourse (e.g., Guo, Zhou, & Lu, 2006; He, 2000; Li, 2007). Theoretical explanations of media content on the margin of legitimacy tend to amplify constraints with the 'birdcage' metaphor (Chen, 1998) and its liberalizing potentials (e.g., Chu, 1994). Despite a flowering of works adopting empirical, cultural, and critical studies methods, audience research in China is largely confined within the boundaries of Western political communication traditions, disproportionately favoring application and replication rather than original theorizing (see Zhou, 2006, for a meta-analysis). Normative or perceived media functions are rarely paid serious attention in political communication research. This has happened quite despite the fact that considerable energies of the

rapid social transitions in China in the past three decades have been emphatically placed on media industry reforms (Moody, 2001). Most notably, the movement away from economic totalitarianism toward financial autonomy has invariably led to a facelift of media content (e.g., He, 1998, 2000; Pan, 1997; Zhao, 2001; Zhao, 2008) which in turn has a significant bearing on media function perceptions.

Manipulated homeostasis in content

While economic self-determination has not been achieved at the expense of political ideology, salience of audience appeal has gained ascendancy, if for nothing more than its commercial implications (Guo, 2001). Stretched, tug-of-war-like, by the political and the economic, mass media are driven into a structural reorientation, particularly its methods of propaganda dissemination (Pan & Chan, 2004). A marked shift from inducing compliance (fear appeal) to seducing acceptance (pleasure appeal) has materialized and become the new discursive norm, the success of which is evidenced by the rise in circulation and ratings for even the most rigid party press and broadcast channels. Buzzwords such as ‘public opinion guidance’ (*yulun daoxiang*), ‘mouthpiece of the people’ (*renmin de houshe*), or ‘market niche’ (*shichang dingwei*), to list just a few, have entered the everyday media vernacular to create and consolidate a veneer of public priority. The emergence, or more precisely the revived emphasis, of the public in public discourse puts people somewhat on an equal footing with the party. Some have interpreted the change as an appeal to journalists’ social conscience as well as market imperatives (Li, 2009).¹

Along with the new images, functions of media have evolved and expanded. They now incorporate limited areas of power supervision, service to the masses, and even representation of disadvantaged social groups. News narratives of this sort find regular expressions in local and national media. The merger of the political and the commercial agenda sets the tone of propaganda, evolving into ‘the most fitted (union) to address the mutual articulation between the state and non-state agents’ (Yu, 2009, p. 20). Together, attention to public needs, selected exposé of corruption, and the increase of the sheer amount of coverage on ordinary people and everyday life have forged a new brand of equilibrium in media content.

Misguided homogeneity in perception

Whether decoding of media messages is consistent with the direction intended depends on perceived media functions. Part of audience evaluations of media clusters around a set of normative categories such as accuracy, informativeness, believability, and trust. Part of it comes from evaluators’ personal experiences and social knowledge attained from political socialization and regular exposure to media. A trajectory can be outlined where the general political-economic context works its way into media content in the specific process of production. The context-to-content transfer carries with it the goal of audience internalization. Given the current political atmosphere and the prevailing media performance in mainland China, consensual perceptions of media functions are associated with positive expectations of media to serve the majority of the broad masses (state rhetoric) and supervise power (institutional or professional rhetoric). Conversely, alternative perceptions

motivate quests for covert interest and hidden agendas where people would harbor negative evaluations of news and would make an effort at looking for what the news is not telling them, both being unintended by producers of news.

As is the case with almost all forms of categorization, encapsulating audience perceptions into these two broad groups is arbitrary and crude, especially in view of the vast complexities and richness of the media landscape in today's China. To achieve a more sophisticated viewing of the full spectrum of media functions and their perceptions in China, we treat the two dimensions (i.e., consensual vs. alternative) as two ends of a continuum to allow for the presence of a full range of possible readings on the receiving end of mass media messages.

Ostensibly, the rhetoric of journalism serving the people as a professional conduct and supervising power as an institutional obligation has been legitimized in official and public discourse. It is important to note that the meaning of power supervision overlaps little with what the term connotes in the West. In China, media exposés of corruption, campaigns for clean government, and sporadic criticisms of the state are confined within very narrow boundaries and are strictly chaperoned.

Information processing strategies

The information processing perspective has been an actively researched area in political communication (Eveland, 1998, 2001, 2002; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003; Kosicki & McLeod, 1990; McLeod & Eveland, 1995). Basically, information processing is a schematic and sense-making process to help people tackle massive amount of information. According to research in this area, individuals develop enduring ways to sift and winnow news from a vast diversity of media channels (Fredin, Kosicki, & Becker, 1996; McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991). These frequently used cognitive routines are lumped together as information processing strategies by Kosicki and McLeod (1990).

Selective exposure as mechanism

Although information processing strategies guide the fusion of incoming news material with existing conceptual knowledge in relevant schemata (Hastie, 1986), selective exposure is neither the sole mechanism nor the inevitable result. Selection tends to be activated jointly with other information processing tactics and decision rules. Kosicki and McLeod (1990) identified three strategies: selective scanning, active processing, and reflective integration. Selective scanning denotes intentional choice of media and content; active processing stresses comprehension through comparison of old and new information; and reflective integration refers to action derived from or driven by information after exposure to media messages.

The latter two have attracted more recent research which has combined them into a single factor of active reflection (Eveland, McLeod, & Horowitz, 1998). Further, reflective integration has been expanded to encompass elaborative processing in the domain of conceptual thinking (Eveland, 2001, 2002; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). Research results have shown that elaborative processing and active reflection are conducive to depth decoding and comprehension, particularly so when combined with attention (e.g., Fredin et al., 1996). For example, the habit of reading between

the lines (active reflection) is positively correlated with greater attention to newspapers news and with news comprehension.

Perceived media functions as antecedent

Like other personality traits, strategies of information processing have their social and psychological antecedents. As discussed earlier, variations in perceived media images and functions constitute a major source of influence on how people process information. Individuals do not read between the lines because they believe media genuinely serve public interest. On the other hand, a person with a strong positive view of media would be less picky with media coverage.

In a recent study on transitional patterns of communication in post-communist societies, Bulgarian scholar Dobrova (2009) investigated the cohabitation of divergent perceptions of media functions and their information processing implications. She found that people who have gone through different cycles of political socialization before and after the collapse of European communism harbor polarized perceptions of media functions. Older people who had first-hand contact with totalitarianism associate new ideas and information with what is known in past experiences and are therefore more sophisticated information consumers than their younger post-communism counterparts. Similar results were reported in other studies which identify interplays between perceptions of media functions and incoming information through a blending process of mental reconstruction (e.g., Eveland, 2002; Perse, 1990). Clearly, an expert media critic would be more willing and able to devote cognitive efforts toward a thematic understanding of the symbolic world than a novice. In brief, the information processing perspective tries to explain attitudes and behavior as a result of what people actively do with media information rather than the treating them as a product of mere exposure (Fleming & Thorson, 2008).

The way perceived media functions affect information processing strategies has another theoretical anchoring in the cognitive response approach which holds that people's beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions subject them to differential habits of information processing and actually determine the extent of influence (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Geiger & Newhagen, 1993; Petty, Brinol, & Tormala, 2002).

The Chinese media system

In China, the shared symbolic meaning of media functions has roots in audience political socialization and value-belief systems (see for example, Zhao, 2001; Zhao, 2008). The ideologues among audience members (e.g., radical loyalists subscribing to either left- or right-wing ideas of social development) typically align with either of the two camps: those subscribing to party discourse and those skeptical and even critical of that discourse. By ideological commitment, the latter further subsumes left-wing views (e.g., being reminiscent of classical Marxist doctrines or sensitive to drawbacks of marketization) and liberal democratic views (e.g., being intent on political reform, institutional and systemic advances toward democracy, often showing discontent with cautious advances in political reform) (Zhao, 1998). Outside of the politically initiated, the depoliticized group is characterized by apathy and mainly gravitates towards the consumerist narrative. Stratifying audience by

political attachment (or the lack of which) entails possibilities of very different perceptions of media functions, both in terms of expectations of what media 'ought to do' and evaluations of what media 'actually do'.

With this in mind, we specify a model conceptualizing perceptions of media functions as dependent on one's socio-demographic attributes. Diverse as they are, information processing strategies are derived directly or indirectly from these perceived functions through media exposure (Figure 1). On the left of Figure 1, a person's social demographic attributes constitute a summary surrogate for socio-economic status and political socialization. While education and income are conventional indicators of socio-economic status, age (not so much gender) plays a non-trivial role in an individual's political socialization in China primarily because of the succession of political movements in the 60 years or so since the founding of the People's Republic. Rapid social transitions create cohorts in China that are customarily identified by their age, usually in 10-year intervals (Qin, 1999). For example, a person who is between 40 and 50 years of age today would have personally experienced the Cultural Revolution. The demographic variables are exogenous to the focal variables of perceived media functions. At the extreme right are our focal dependent variable information-processing strategies, differentially adopted by people of varied socialization processes and perceptions of media functions. In between are attention variables for four types of newspaper and television news.

Central to our conceptualization are the paths from perceived media functions leading to newspaper reading and television viewing and further to information processing. We treat perceived media functions both as a consequence and a reflection of societal level influences. As discussed earlier, transformations of media message systems in China have redirected the realm of public sphere toward a new discursive legitimacy commensurate with the growing market forces (Chen, 1998; Chen & Lee, 1998). Official definitions of normative functions of mass media now involve public interest and power supervision with strengths of salience unparalleled in any previous political administration (Li & Zhang, 2002; Zhang, 2000; Zhou, 1997). Our model intends to address the issue of whether the shift in content appeal transfers and registers in the minds of the audience.

The nature of perceived media functions as outcome of socialization and gradual permeation of social transition not only directly guides media selection but, more importantly, it indirectly steers the way people process incoming information via media use. Studies on hostile media phenomenon (HMP) discovered long ago that

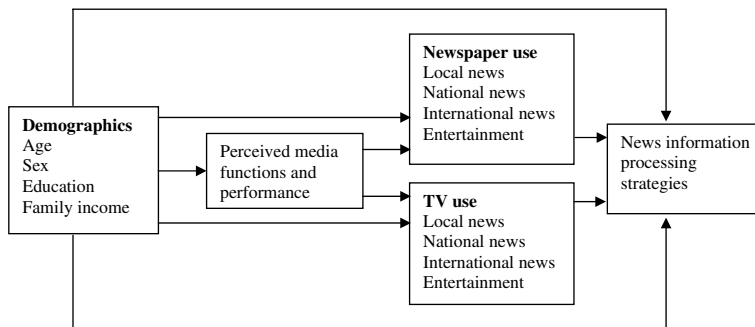


Figure 1. Perceived media functions and news processing model.

people use and evaluate media content differently in keeping with their own pre-existing biased perceptions of media's roles (e.g., Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). The micro end of this macro-to-micro effect is reflective of what Markus and Zajonc (1985) summarized as the S-O-R model. Although the model has recently been elaborated to include an additional O (i.e., O-S-O-R), the idea remains more or less the same. That is, socio-contextual factors act in diverse manners on individuals who bring them along in their routine encounters with information. In turn, incoming messages are absorbed, abandoned, or otherwise interpreted and reconstructed by recipients in accordance with perceptions of the message system context.

Method

Sampling

Data of this study came from a probability sample of 1000 adults aged 18 and above in Guangzhou, the largest metropolis in South China. The city, one of the forerunners in reforms, boasts a vibrant market economy and eagerly embraces cultural influence from the neighboring Hong Kong through interpersonal and kindred networks and television (Chen, Guo, & Zhu, 2002). We selected Guangzhou as the research site not only because of the ideologically and culturally diverse channels of information available to local residents, but also because these media bear significantly different ascribed and perceived functions, which are likely to evoke information processing strategies that may be at odds with one another.

The second point deserves some explanation. To residents of this city, various aspects of political life are not in any way less restrained than their counterparts elsewhere in mainland China, mass media in particular. All our earlier descriptions of the message system in China are as apt for Guangzhou as they are for the rest of the country. What gives Guangzhou its uniqueness is what can only be found in that city: the routine presence of an ideological contrast of media content. When the Chinese state propaganda meets Hong Kong free press² to form a quasi-legitimate media consumption environment, observations of difference in recipients' perceived media functions and their impact offer a test-ground of many interesting hypotheses (Guo, Zhu, & Chen, 2001). This study takes advantage of this uniqueness by contrasting different types of perceived media functions and traces them to the way people process news information from various sources.

To that end, we commissioned our research to a professional survey organization in Guangzhou which employed the computer-aided telephone interview (CATI) methods in July and August of 2007. The response rate (RR3) was 41.8% and cooperation rate (COOP3) was 53.6% (AAPOR, 2002). The sampling frame adopted was the one regularly used and updated by the survey organization. The original frame, which was a combination of the city's telephone directory and household registration in the smallest administrative unit or neighborhood committee (*juweihui*), has been expanded over the years to include an increasingly comprehensive coverage and reach.

Measurement

Demographic variables included age, gender, family monthly income, and education. The mean age was 31.44 years (s.d. = 12.56; 50% male). The observed average age

was slightly lower than the figure from the national census.³ Since the sample-census difference is smaller than 1%, we decided not to weight the data. Monthly income was a 5-point scale, from 'less than RMB¥1,000' to 'more than RMB¥10,000' (mean = 2.90; s.d. = 1.07). Education was indexed with a 7-point scale, ranging from 'below primary school' to 'postgraduate school' (mean = 4.48; s.d. = 1.18). In our model, demographic variables serve as controls and double as indicators of socio-economic status and political socialization that are expected to have discriminant powers for outcome variables.

Media use separated into newspaper reading and television viewing. Instead of the standard exposure questions (i.e., days per week for newspaper reading; hours spent per day for television viewing), we focused on measures of attention because of the concept's superior analytical values (e.g., Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Fennegan & Viswanath, 1997). Specifically, Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) found that attention is a much stronger predictor of media's cognitive effects than conventional measures of exposure and frequency of use. Since then, the adoption of attention as a preferred questionnaire item has been the rule rather than the exception. Attention to news on both newspapers and television was measured with 5-point Likert scales from 'very little' to 'a great deal' for the following four news categories: (1) local; (2) national; (3) international; and (4) entertainment. Each of the first three categories represents both a locale of news events progressively more distant from recipients and a specific way of journalism practice. Moreover, they are often lumped together as indicators of 'hard news' as opposed to soft and entertaining news. Although serious news can and indeed often does contain fun and pleasurable elements, mass media usually set aside a special niche for entertainment news in their attempt to typify reality (e.g., Tuchman, 1997). In her study, Sharp (1988) called for increased attention to the theoretical value of analyzing the reception of entertainment news as a conceptually distinct category.

Our choice of forms of media for analysis not only indicates a commitment to a conceptual distinction between textual (e.g., newspaper) and audiovisual (e.g., television) messages in the tradition of political communication research, but also reflects a long-standing academic concern that newspaper is conducive to cognitive processing of information and television is not. At the time of our survey, the Internet penetration rate already reached a record high in China. However, the essential characteristics of the Internet as a congregation site of a vast number of small 'net publics' are not pertinent to our conceptual model. We therefore excluded the Internet from the analysis.

This block of variables was analytically placed between perceived media functions and information processing. We assume that individuals are already equipped with knowledge, expectations, and perceptions of media functions before they come into contact with news information (pre-exposure), but can only activate them in response to messages (during- and post-exposure).

As a block, *perceived media functions* were measured with five individual statements, all on a 5-point Likert scale, from 'extremely disagree' to 'extremely agree.' A factor analysis (principal component with direct Oblimin rotation) yielded two factors. Since the estimates were not based on maximum likelihood modeling, the nature of the factor structures is at best exploratory instead of confirmatory. We elected to perform principal component analysis because our hypotheses were themselves exploratory. Previous studies on perceived media functions are scanty and

little is known about the discriminant validity across various dimensions of this concept. The same can be said of judgment of media performance and information processing strategies.

Consensual perceptions ($\alpha = .79$) contained three positive statements: (1) the role of news media is to supervise power; (2) news media ought to monitor policy implementation; and (3) the function of media is to boost economic development. *Alternative perceptions* ($\alpha = .69$) subsumed two items, both dwelling on negative aspects of media (see Kosicki & McLeod, 1990): (1) media should not ignore its role of educating people; and (2) news media should not try to influence what people think (Table 1). As mentioned earlier, rather than a dissent pursuit, emphasis on power supervision conforms to the state's carefully constructed rhetoric on clean government. Judgment of media's underachievement implies a 'right' direction (mass education) and a 'wrong' direction (bad influence). The second factor therefore could be seen as discontentment with media failing to fulfill what they 'ought to do'.

In order to contrast individuals' expectations of what media ought to do with evaluations of media's actual performance, we built a set of measures of *perceived media performance*. A matrix of eight items grouped into two factors (principal component with direct Oblimin rotation): *credibility judgment* ($\alpha = .72$) vs. *problem judgment* ($\alpha = .65$). The former was characterized by four internally coherent views praising media on the normative criteria of accuracy, representation, trustworthiness, and autonomy. The latter was perceptually the opposite, casting doubts on media's conduct across the same content characteristics (Table 2).

The focal dependent variable, *information processing strategies*, was measured with four Likert-scale agreement-disagreement statements, which loaded on three principal component factors: *Reflective questioners* are akin to reflective integration in that these media consumers share the habit of (1) trying to find out what the news is hiding; and (2) stopping and thinking about news or aspects of news during exposure. Like active integrators, *reading-between-the-lines* are those who are constantly on the lookout for latent text. In contrast, *non-reflective trusters* rarely question what they see in news (Table 3). The fact that 'reading between the lines' cross-loaded with 'stop and think' (.479) was well within expectation, since the two

Table 1. Factor analysis of perceived media functions: what media ought to do (principal component extraction, direct Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization, $N = 1000$).

Questionnaire items	Consensual perceptions	Alternative perceptions
1. The role of news media is to supervise power	.842	.129
2. News media ought to monitor policy implementation	.838	.108
3. The function of media is to boost economic development	.699	.260
4. Media should not ignore its role of educating people	.077	.821
5. News media should not try to influence what people think	.258	.745
Variance accounted for (%)	40.80	22.57

Table 2. Factor analysis of media performance evaluations: judgment of what media actually do (principal component with direct Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization, $N = 1000$).

Questionnaire items	Credibility judgment	Problem judgment
1. On the whole, news coverage is accurate	.811	.011
2. Most media speak for ordinary people	.787	.025
3. Most media stories are trustworthy	.776	.080
4. Most media enjoy great freedom in news coverage	.689	.171
5. Interest of many social groups has not been reflected in media content	-.071	.704
6. Media only speak for a minority of people	-.038	.692
7. There is too much negative reports in news	.148	.633
8. There is too much sensational reports in news	.228	.594
Variance accounted for (%)	30.70	21.36

shared an internal demand for cognitive elaboration. As a result of the small number of items in the pool, we were left with two which were single-item factors.

Results

Newspaper news attention

We began our analyses with a contrast of perceptions of what media ought to do (functions) and what media actually do (performance evaluation) in terms of their impact on attention paid to newspaper local, national, international, and entertainment news (Table 4). A brief overview of the predictive structures across the four demographic variables showed that men were more likely to be avid readers of distant news (i.e., national and international) than women who were likely drawn to entertainment content. These turned out to be the only significant demographic predictors of newspaper news attention. We were somewhat surprised that education failed to predict newspaper reading, although it pointed to the right direction for national news. One possible explanation for this ‘anomaly’ is that well-educated

Table 3. Factor analysis of information processing strategies (principal component with direct Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization, $N = 1000$).

Questionnaire items	Reflective questioners	Reading-between-the-liners	Non-reflective trusters
1. When reading news, I tend to think that they are always hiding something	.860	-.142	.193
2. News often makes me stop and think	.702	.479	-.053
3. I have the habit of reading between the lines	.005	.909	.174
4. I rarely question what I see in news	.116	.152	.963
Variance accounted for (%)	31.14	27.49	24.97

Table 4. OLS regression analysis: predicting newspaper news attention with perceived media functions and media performance evaluations ($N = 1000$).

Independent variables	Dependent variables: newspaper news attention			
	Local (mean = 3.7; s.d. = 1.0)	National (mean = 3.4; s.d. = 1.2)	International (mean = 2.9; s.d. = 1.3)	Entertainment (mean = 2.8; s.d. = 1.4)
Demographics				
Gender (male)	-.08	.14*	.20***	-.28***
Income	.05	.02	.05	-.04
Education	-.05	.06	-.02	-.05
Age	.01	.00	-.02	-.03
Adjusted R^2 (%)	0.60	1.00	4.30***	8.70***
Perceived media functions				
Consensual	.18***	.20***	.15***	.14***
Alternative	-.17***	.16***	.13***	.01
Incr. ΔR^2 (%)	4.80***	4.20***	3.30***	1.90***
Media performance evaluations				
Credibility	.21***	.22***	.14***	.12***
Problem	-.12***	.07*	.12***	.00
Incr. ΔR^2 (%)	4.70***	4.70***	3.10***	1.50***

Note: Entries are OLS regression coefficients. Increased ΔR^2 blocks controlled for demographics.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

people are turning away from hard copies in favor of digital news. This is an empirical question to be tested in future research.

The two dimensions of perceived media functions, consensual and alternative views, displayed distinct patterns of influence on newspaper news reading. Supporters of media's officially defined roles tended to follow local news closely ($\beta = .18$; $p < .001$), whereas critics appeared to be equally vehemently rejecting it ($\beta = -.17$; $p < .001$). A bipolar influence of this clarity in direction points to two possibilities: (1) consensual readers saw community public affairs as an essential site for press supervision of political power and promotion of economic development, perceptions that were apparently at odds with those of alternative function perceivers who emphasized mass enlightenment instead; and (2) media function perceptions were most likely to produce variance toward the extreme within individuals' immediate life space (i.e., local community) where people have first-hand contact with reality.

Interestingly, although not surprisingly, holders of consensual views about media functions were evenly attentive to the other three types of news content ($\beta = .20$; $p < .001$ for national news; $\beta = .15$; $p < .001$ for international news; and $\beta = .14$; $p < .001$ for entertainment news). It seemed that perceptions in line with the state rhetoric facilitated focal attention to news, independent of categories. The non-conformist perceptions exerted weaker impact on newspaper national and international news attention and completely dropped out of significance for entertainment news.

Nearly identical results were found in the predictive patterns of the two dimensions of media performance evaluations: credibility vs. problem judgment. In evaluating media's actual performance, respondents who gave positive judgment about media's credibility (e.g., trustworthy, accurate, representative, and free) tended to pay close attention to all four types of news content, particularly local and national coverage ($\beta = .21$; $p < .001$ for local; $\beta = .22$; $p < .001$ for national), which were considerably more intense than international and entertainment news.

Conversely, respondents who expressed resentment against media's daily output highlighted lack of representativeness and an overdose of market appeals. Again, we detected among these people lukewarm attention toward local news ($\beta = -.12$; $p < .001$) and a total lack of interest in entertainment news ($\beta = .00$). Their mental commitment to national and international news was roughly comparable to their credibility perceiver counterparts, although to a lesser extent. Similar to perceived media functions, evaluation of media performance was positively associated with attention to different types of news without significant differentiation for credibility evaluators, but differentially for problem evaluators.

Television news attention

News has a tangential place on television which is primarily an entertainment medium. However, media function and performance judgments produced interesting variances on attention to TV news (Table 5). Effects of demographics were scanty.

Table 5. OLS regression analysis: predicting television news attention with perceived media functions and media performance evaluations ($N = 1000$).

Independent variables	Dependent variables: television news attention			
	Local (mean = 3.7; s.d. = 1.2)	National (mean = 3.5; s.d. = 1.1)	International (mean = 3.0; s.d. = 1.3)	Entertainment (mean = 2.8; s.d. = 1.3)
Demographics				
Gender (male)	.02	.04	.20***	-.28***
Income	.02	.07	.06	-.04
Education	-.12***	-.04	-.02	-.05
Age	.06	.01	-.04	.03
Adjusted R^2 (%)	1.70***	0.60	4.60***	6.70***
Perceived media functions				
Consensual	.26***	.24***	.15***	.16***
Alternative	.10**	.14***	.13***	.01
Incr. ΔR^2 (%)	5.80***	6.10***	3.30***	2.10***
Media performance evaluations				
Credibility	.24***	.24***	.19***	.21***
Problem	.11**	.17**	.16***	.13***
Incr. ΔR^2 (%)	6.60***	7.60***	5.70***	5.00***

Note: Entries are OLS regression coefficients. Increased ΔR^2 blocks controlled for demographics.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Men preferred news at remote places ($\beta = .20$; $p < .001$) to entertainment news ($\beta = -.28$; $p < .001$) much more strongly than women. Higher education reflected negatively on local news attention.

Respondents whose perceptions of media functions were congruent with the state definitions gravitated to all four types of news, although attention waned somewhat with the increase in distance of news. In other words, prediction was strongest for local news ($\beta = .26$; $p < .001$), but weakest for international news ($\beta = .15$; $p < .001$). Apparently, the 'ought to' part of media function perceptions was most applicable to the home community relative to elsewhere.

Similar patterns were found for media function perceivers who favored education and removal of opinion manipulation. But the effects were considerably smaller, about half of what they were for consensual perceptions in local and national news. Like newspaper reading, cognitive emphasis on mass education and thought emancipation had little, if all, to do with attention to entertainment news on television.

In terms of media performance evaluations, it was quite clear that respondents were attracted to all four types of television news whether they attached importance to media credibility or not, only more so for the credibility group than the problem one. Discriminant power between credibility and problem evaluators here was obviously one of degree rather than type. Comparing the impact of key independent variables on newspaper reading and television viewing, one sees identical patterns. It seemed that the impact of perceived media functions and media performance evaluations showed respect for neither the medium nor types of news.

Information processing

The last step of our analyses traced the flow of influence outlined in Figure 1 with information processing strategies being the final dependent variables. Across the four demographics, only education yielded a mild effect on the reflective questioners factor. The rest dropped out of statistical significance for all three processing factors (results not shown in Table 6). Age was conceptualized as a strong surrogate for political socialization in the context of political life in China. The fact that the variable failed to be significantly related to either perceived media functions or patterns of information processing was puzzling. We could only assume that a cohort analysis across the span of several decades would better serve the research purpose of teasing out the impact of political socialization (see Chaffee, 1991).

Reflective questioners

Respondents in this category might be sufficiently vigilant about cover-ups to develop habits of stopping and thinking about news during and after exposure. As the locale of newspaper news moved farther away, cognitive efforts increased ($\beta = .10$; $p < .01$ for local news; $\beta = .12$; $p < .001$ for national news; and $\beta = .19$; $p < .001$ for international news). For reflective questioners, attention to international news in the Chinese press was most likely associated with suspicions of conspiracy. This is understandable since access to sources of verification for this type of news was largely unavailable. The fact that these respondents questioned local news relatively minimally confirmed this logic. Local knowledge and

Table 6. OLS regression analysis: predicting information processing strategies with media attention, perceived media functions and media performance evaluations ($N = 1000$).

Independent variables	Dependent variables: information processing strategies		
	Reflective questioners	Reading-between-the-liners	Non-reflective trusters
Demographics			
<i>Adjusted R² (%)</i>	2.80***	0.50	0.70
Media attention			
<i>Newspaper</i>			
Local	.10**	.12***	.10**
National	.12***	.16***	.14***
International	.19***	.18***	.14***
Entertainment	.05	.09**	-.00
<i>Television</i>			
Local	.09*	.16***	.09**
National	.07*	.18***	.15***
International	.14***	.18***	.15***
Entertainment	.07*	.18***	.03
Incr. ΔR^2 (%)	4.80***	7.70***	3.60***
Perceived media functions			
Consensual	.05	.21***	.17***
Alternative	.23***	.16***	.05
Incr. ΔR^2 (%)	3.60***	2.60***	1.50***
Media performance evaluations			
Credibility	-.01	.26***	.05
Problem	.21**	.14***	-.14***
Incr. ΔR^2 (%)	3.30***	2.50***	1.20***

Note: Entries are OLS regression coefficients. Increased ΔR^2 blocks controlled for demographics.
 * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

experiential reality left less to guesswork. Entertainment news had no significant relationship with this factor.

Television news showed roughly the same pattern of influence, except the effects were reduced and attention to entertainment news became significant. Results suggested that compared with the textual medium, the visual medium was less conducive to conceptual thinking. Consistent with previous research and conventional wisdom, audience members were mentally more laid-back when watching TV than when they were reading newspapers. Together, the two media accounted for about 5% of the variance in this factor.

For the block of perceived media functions, we observed a vastly distinct, albeit expected difference in prediction. Individuals who valued media functions promoted by the state were obviously less willing to cognitively belabor ($\beta = .05$) to discover hidden agenda than those whose perceived media functions were at odds with the official line ($\beta = .23$; $p < .001$). Naturally, the more challenging a person was of the homeostasis in media functions, the more likely the person was to challenge news coverage.

Our analysis of the impact of media performance evaluations on reflective questioners revealed parallel findings as those reported above. Results showed a clear divergence between respondents who trusted media ($\beta = -.01$) and those who took issues with the media ($\beta = .21$; $p < .001$). Trust in media content tended to impede motivations to challenge coverage. It would be a *non sequitur* to argue otherwise.

Reading-between-the-lines

The habit of reading between the lines is typically developed by people who believe that certain latent content is actually intended in the manifest text. In the context of political life in China, discrepancies between everyday reality and media rhetoric reality have long forged a system of shared symbols on implicit messages. News encoders and decoders participate in a game of double-meanings through which the former implies something and the latter tries to guess it.

That explains the near-uniform prediction for all the independent variables on this factor. Looking down the middle column in Table 6, one finds a list of regression coefficients that are identical in direction and similar in magnitude. The only anomaly is newspaper entertainment news which was significant but weak, suggesting that readers were less motivated to engage in deep reading of celebrity gossips and pop culture than serious public affairs. The observed difference in newspaper and television entertainment news might be explained by the fact that the former is mainly thematic and the latter episodic in nature. This finding is consistent with results from a series of experiments on cognitive effects of television by Iyengar (1994) who adopted framing analysis and found that comprehensive and thematic presentations of news are more conducive to political knowledge and rational evaluations of political candidates than fragmented and episodic news.

Non-reflective trusters

Of the three factors, this group of audience is the most passive in information processing. Attention to local, national, and international news on both newspapers and television exhibited a modicum of positive effects on passive reception after controlling for demographics, although the same cannot be said about entertainment news. We noticed that for both media, local news was the weakest predictor, indicating once again that people were least likely to take news at face value when the coverage was about affairs and people they were familiar with.

When perceived media functions entered the equation, we found that respondents on the consensual end of the continuum were more trusting and less likely to raise questions about media content than their alternative counterparts ($\beta = .17$; $p < .001$). The same tendency was irrelevant to those whose perceptions were characterized by an emphasis on what media ought not to do ($\beta = .05$).

When it comes to judgment of media's actual performance, another contrast in effects was seen. Apparently, satisfaction with media content had little to do with being either challenging (reflective questioner column) or non-challenging ($\beta = .05$), whereas disgruntled audience members tended to behave in the opposite direction ($\beta = -.14$; $p < .001$).

Discussions and conclusions

Studies of media's cognitive effects cannot sidestep the broad socio-political context and historical circumstances surrounding and leading to these effects. Our research on conceptual connections among perceptions of media functions, evaluations of media performance, news attention, and information processing specified a model of influence against the environment of China's social transition. In so doing, we tried to integrate the exogenous contextual variables with the endogenous psychological ones. While the basis for the former argument was logically derived, its theoretical linkage with the latter was empirically tested.

Social demographics

The four demographic variables representing individuals' social anchoring did not co-vary significantly with either perceived media functions, attention to news or information processing strategies. Aside from men's preference for international news and women's favoring of entertainment news, the only other significant prediction was that educated people tended to avoid local news. It is hard to pinpoint the source of the general lackluster performance of demographics. Indeed, the findings were disheartening to us, given our pre-data anticipations. Rapid social transitions in China in the past three decades have engendered fundamental changes in the distribution of wealth and education as well as patterns of political socialization.

As Dobрева (2009) suggested in her study of reformed Bulgaria, post-reform socialization tended to leave its imprint on people who would experience difficulties adjusting to pre-reform political life. One would expect China, which has also undergone profound socio-structural transformations, to exhibit similar gaps across people of different eras of political socialization. This, as it turned out, was not to be found in our data analyses.

One possible explanation lies in the fact that despite the deepening economic reforms, the core political values symbolically represented in the media message system in China have remained enduring and dominant. Conceptually, it seemed that the veneer of emphasis in official rhetoric on public priority and clean government has failed to generate cross-generational variations. Another potential source of explanation comes from how 'age' is operationalized and whether it is measured longitudinally. We suspect that a proper time-series cohort analysis would distinguish people of different generations of political socialization.

Perceived media functions

The way individuals conceive of what mass media ought to do, when considered in the aggregate, has social causes. The dynamics of the relationship lies in people's cognitive adaptability to the external political atmosphere. Perhaps nowhere is such sensitivity more put to test than in today's China where rapid and profound social transitions demand systemic, institutional, and personal responses. Mass media, being what they are in China, have made the best of their newly-gained access to the commercial goldmine through advertising. At the same time, they take every precaution not to fall into the political quicksand through deviance from the dominant discourse. Policy shifts have created and consolidated a new homeostasis in

media production and content whereby traditional hard-sell propaganda is replaced by an emphasis on public interest and power supervision, both carefully monitored in practice by the authorities under a new strategy of soft-sell propaganda.

One place to view the impact of media institutional transformations on individual cognition is perceived media functions. Our data showed that audience perceptions divided into two dimensions. Consensual perceivers favored policy and power supervision and promotion of economic advances. Their views were in line with media's well-versed narratives on China's own brand of political democracy and economic development. On the other hand, people who desired mass enlightenment and thought emancipation, that which the media are incapable of achieving at the present stage, constituted a very different 'media use public'.

Media performance evaluation

This part of the influence model (Figure 1) examined people's assessment of media's actual performance. Data analyses yielded two factors: the credibility judgment factor indicated satisfaction with the professional aspects of journalism and the problem judgment factor pointed to failures by mass media in social responsibilities. Although the two groups of people concentrated on different aspects of media, their opinions overlapped on media representation of ordinary people: one was commending the performance and the other critical of it.

Variables in this block were analytically placed in the same location as perceived media functions for purpose of comparison in terms of effects on news attention and information processing. Conceptually, we expected within-block differences, but between-block consistencies in prediction structure. That is to say, the two performance judgment factors should show distinct paths of influence on dependent variables in the same way as the two perceived function factors.

The rationale behind our expectation of within-block difference stemmed from knowledge about audience behavior in China. Our previous research in this area generally converged on the finding that people who were pleased with what they saw in media shared commonalities that were systematically different from those who were not impressed by media content.

Attention to news

Aside from demographics, the effects of perceived media functions and performance on news attention were comparable for newspaper and television news. Generally speaking, views that were underpinned by the mainstream discourse (consensual and credibility perceptions) facilitated attention to news with little variations across types of content and forms of medium. In comparison, attention to news by the fault-finders (alternative and problem perceptions), on the other hand, was markedly less intense. One plausible explanation is that 'party-liners' might feel a greater need for news and might actually enjoy news more than the 'dissenters'. Future research in this relationship should examine the role of mental attachment to news and its social and psychological antecedents.

Particularly noteworthy, though, is the opposite direction of influence for these two blocks of variables on newspaper local news. Individuals who assessed media negatively appeared to turn away from news about their own community, but not

elsewhere. Why local news? Why newspaper? We could identify three possibilities: (1) the observed negative effects might be a random occurrence given the probability (two out of 16 pairs of coefficients); (2) alternative perceivers assigned less weight to local news coverage than national and international news because they harbor broader cosmopolitan views; and (3) familiarity with local affairs turned critical attention away from community news. Whether any one of these possibilities stands awaits further empirical investigation.

Information processing

As the focal dependent variable, the concept of information processing strategies proved to be multi-dimensional with three principal component factors whose demarcations were consistent with our conceptual definitions and the specific circumstances of media in the Chinese context. Data analyses showed little between-medium variations in influence patterns. Newspaper reading and television viewing predicted each of the three dimensions in more or the less the same way both within and across factors. The habit of reading between the lines was notably the most strongly predicted. This confirmed our belief that reading between the lines was a habitual mental activity for Chinese audience members regardless of medium and type of content. Correlations among the three factors showed that even the non-reflective trusters would be reluctant to forego this habit ($r = .26$; $p < .001$). If anything, media socialization in China seemed to have perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes about media and an almost automatic vigilance to media content. In comparison, media use was not as powerful a predictor of critical processing of a higher order (reflective questioning) or a much lower one (non-reflective trusting).

As expected, the two perceived media functions factors went in opposite directions in their impact on information processing. Where alternative perceivers scored, consensual perceivers cringed out of significance and vice versa. Predictions on reading between the lines stayed strong for both factors for reasons similar to those mentioned above.

Media performance evaluations produced differential effects on the three dimensions of information processing. Of specific interest are the gaps in the prediction of reflective questioning and non-reflective trusting, two ends of a critical thinking scale. It is very clear that positive appraisals of media's actual performance impeded deep processing, although they did not augment the probability of non-reflection either. Intuitively, individuals who resented media's coverage of news would be more likely to ask questions and engage in counter-argument during and after exposure. Our data provided empirical basis for this claim.

Taken together, the current research conceptually defined and operationally tested the relationships among four blocks of variables with the aim of establishing theoretical connections. While acknowledging the full complexity of the concept of information processing, this study narrowed the focus on three aspects of that concept. Findings presented here demonstrated sufficient differentiation in factor loading and sources of antecedents to justify the dimensional separation. On a larger scale, we noted that decades of economic reforms in China have not made people abandon the impulse to evoke between-the-lines reading of media content, a habit carried over from the era prior to the reforms. The changing socio-political environment at the systemic level has implications for media production, content,

and consumption, a chain of impact whose rich dynamics are yet to be unveiled in political communication research.

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Notes

1. Following an official visit to the Party's flagship newspaper the *People's Daily* by the Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin on September 26, 1996, a fresh wave of information campaign was launched to promote the notion of 'the opinion guidance role of the press' extracted from a high-profile speech made by Jiang during the visit. The speech was widely seen as a rhetoric move to direct media's functions in shaping public opinions toward 'advocating economic reconstruction', an official jargon for commercialization.
2. This statement requires qualifications: (1) although some of Hong Kong's newspapers are available on the news stand in Guangzhou, the popular and yet 'unfriendly' ones continue to be blacklisted and are off-limits. However, local residents watch Hong Kong television news and entertainment on a regular basis; (2) since its hand-over to the mainland more than a decade ago, Hong Kong has witnessed a slow but steady loss of its press freedom to self-regulation by the media institutions in a bid to woo the mainland market.
3. According to the communiqué of the latest census, the Fifth Population Census conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2000, the average age of Chinese people was 32.476 (http://www.stats.gov.cn/was40/gjtjj_en_outline.jsp?page=3&channelid=4920).

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