

Review of Todd Hazelbarth's "The Chinese Media"

ZHOU Yongxiu

Department of Foreign Language Teaching and Research
Taishan University
Tai'an City 271021, Shandong Province, China

Abstract

This is a critical review of "The Chinese Media: More Autonomous and Diverse, Within Limits" by Todd Hazelbarth, of its scope note, summary, structure, rationale, methodology and findings. Although Todd made some mistakes in accounting for the change in China's media, it doesn't prevent him from inferring some reasonable findings. Even examined today, most of his results are still acceptable.

Key Words: Chinese media, autonomy, reform, control, tension

1. Introduction

"The Chinese Media: More Autonomous and Diverse, Within Limits"¹ by Todd Hazelbarth is a report of a one-year research into the Chinese media, funded by Exceptional Intelligence Analyst Program (EIAP) of CIA, USA. By analysing the recent change in Chinese media and the underlying causes, the report concludes that the Chinese media are becoming more autonomous and diverse, but at the same time, powerful domestic institutions continue to constrain the media. Therefore, "the dynamic tension between the media and the State is likely to continue in China well into the future."

2. Background

Before the main body of the article come "Scope Note" and "Summary", which function as an introduction to the report.

In "Scope Note" the researcher declares that this unclassified report is drawn from the results of an EIAP research project. This unmistakably sets the context of the research considering that EIAP is managed by the Center of the Study of Intelligence (CSI) of CIA, and that this article is posted by CSI on the official website of CIA. Also in "Scope Note" the writer explains the sources of the information he obtained. For some understandable reasons Todd claims that some of the sources prefer to remain anonymous, which will, to some extent, harms the authenticity of the information.

Following the "Scope Note" is "Summary", which highlights the conclusion of the research and the researcher's major evidence.

Ironically, the conclusion drawn at the cost of one year and a certain sum of fund only confirms a Chinese philosophy: The prospect is bright but the way ahead is long.

At the end of "Summary" Todd boldly made a judgement that "complete autonomy will not materialize in the post-Deng Xiaoping era", which should be the gem of the monograph, given the special nature and role of CIA. But limited by the space, the summary failed to show how the evidence led to the conclusion and prediction.

Although no mention is made of why Todd chose this research area, his effort has been noted—to figure out the whole iceberg by measuring its tip and at the same time predict its potential trajectory by analysing its movement. In other words, this report exemplifies how to find out the underlying logic by gathering and analysing piles upon piles of trifling information.

¹ CSI97-10003, September 1997. <http://www.cia.gov/csi/monograph425050797/5.htm>

3. Structure

By and large, the structure of this monograph is typically that of a reversed pyramid: the weightiest information comes first. To be exact, the rough outline of the monograph is:

Scope Note→Summary→main body (evidence and analysis) →Appendix

This retrogressive structure is vitally necessary if we take into consideration that CIA is to provide basic background information for policy makers. That is, the form of this piece serves its purpose perfectly.

The main body of the monograph goes as follows:

The Expanding Chinese Media→Greater Autonomy→What Lies Behind the Growing Autonomy and Diversity→Prospect

This part is crucial for the researcher to justify his conclusion. Why does he claim that the Chinese media are more autonomous and diverse? His main reasons are that both the media numbers and media content are growing. But the growth in numbers and content doesn't necessarily indicate that the media are more autonomous and diverse, because these changes may be the results of the ruling Chinese Communist Party's up-down reform. In this case, without going deeper into the causes, these changes couldn't show us the possible path the Chinese media would take in the future.

4. Rationale

The unwritten premise of the work is that in such an authoritative country as China any change in media should be a parameter of the Chinese political-economic-cultural climate. For this reason, the researcher attached great importance to collecting and analysing information about the change in China's media numbers and media content. In order to identify the change the researcher needs to set a frame of reference as well as the samples. As for the change in media numbers, the researcher simply made some historical comparison of the numbers of television, radio, newspapers and magazines. It's a pity that he failed to address the ever-increasing websites and Internet users, which have made a conspicuous contribution to the change in China's mediascape.

Here the researcher made some erroneous analyses. Firstly, the fast increasing numbers of TV and radios in China don't mean the national control is weakening; on the contrary, it is the result of the ruling party's attempt to enhance its ideological dominance. Similarly, to a great degree, the diversification of media content doesn't imply deemphasis of ideology. In theory, it is intended to upgrade the Party's ideological indoctrination. The misinterpretation reveals that although the majority of the information they get is true, accurate and affluent, the CIA couldn't make the most out of what they have obtained. And probably, this is one of the reasons why CIA and FBI have decided to recruit some Chinese scholars this year.

5. Methodology and Sample

Induction is the main method employed in the research. It's an appropriate research tool, but there are several risks in this reasoning process. For example, if we know that

- (1) The Chinese are black-haired;
- (2) The Japanese are black-haired;
- (3) The Mongolians are black-haired;
- (4) The Koreans are black-haired;
- (5) The Indians are black-haired, and
- (6) The Nepalese are black-haired,

it is acceptable to conclude that the East Asian people are black-haired, but it's too conservative and therefore a waste of information capital to only claim that many East Asian people are black-haired. In the meantime, it is a risk to say that the Asian people are black-haired, let alone all the people over the globe. But we must make sure that all the premiss are true and accurate before we infer any conclusion. In the above-said example, we must ensure that the information contained in the six short sentences is acceptable. However, sometimes this is not an easy task. Let's take China for instance. There are 56 peoples in China, so it's not reasonable to claim all the Chinese people are black-haired even if you have got desired information on 55 peoples. Additionally, we must make sure that the hair of our subjects are naturally black, not artificially black.

As for Todd's research, it is critical to work out why the media numbers and contents are expanding: Are these the results of the citizens' consistent struggle or the Party's up-down reforms? If in the latter case, it's unjustifiable to say the China's media are more autonomous and diverse. Moreover, Todd should have explained whether the content of all media is expanding, or the content of some media is expanding while that of other media is not expanding. I have noticed that in this part Todd only discussed radio, magazines and journals.

As an intelligence expert, it is necessary and feasible for him to obtain as much information as possible in order to make a sound judgement. To quote an academic term, the size of his sample should be as big as it could. To prove his conclusion, Todd presents detailed and abundant information, but at this stage whether or not the information are authentic comes to the focus. After careful investigation and check, I must admit that the overwhelming majority of information is true and accurate, which qualifies him as a good CIA intelligence expert. But this doesn't necessarily mean that all the information is acceptable. For example, he mentioned that some figures "underreport actual circulation" to avoid taxes. The pertinent footnote says that this information comes from a US specialist's research. But my information reveals that some print media would rather overreport their circulation to attract advertisement than underreport the actual circulation to avoid taxes. Some other information such as "some 25,000 printing houses and hundreds of individual bookstores produce and sell nonofficial material—mostly romance literature and pornography" is groundless according to my own previous investigation.

Furthermore, I still have some more doubts.

Firstly, his sources are so limited that it gave me an impression when referring to his footnotes that some different information is actually from the same source.

Secondly, most of the key sources are from outside China. But my suggestion is that the credibility of this kind of information should be connected with their political attitude toward China.

Thirdly, some information is from human right activists and nongovernmental organisations, but for some reasons the writer didn't give further details of the sources. The information should be dubious if the source holds some longstanding stereotypes against China.

6. Findings

By making extensive use of information, including 5 figures and 2 tables, Todd presented the expansion of China's media numbers and content.

As I have said previously, different motives may bring about the same change in China's mediascape. So, it is vitally necessary to analyse what helped to make the Chinese media more autonomous and diverse. To our great satisfaction, Todd attached the most importance to this part.

The motives Todd identified include:

- greater prosperity and literacy
- a general decline in the influence of political ideologies and system of belief
- growing Chinese popular skepticism toward authority
- increased contact with the West
- greater competition in the media market
- ebbing government resources
- improved professional training for journalists
- new technologies, e.g. Cable TV, satellite dishes, Internet.

Here I must point out that Todd has overlooked a very important driving factor—As human beings, the Chinese policy-makers are likely to modernise their own ideas, especially when influenced by their relatives and aides. In fact, more and more Chinese leaders have realised that to retain the Party's status quo they must initiate some reforms in media. In China, this factor is more important than some other factors Todd identified.

As for the negative factors which hinder the change, Todd found out that

- (1) Impact of Tiananmen crackdown still works;
- (2) The Party has maintained or reinforced efforts to control media, including

- it requires that newspapers be registered and attached to a government ministry, institute, research facility, labour group, or other State-sanctioned organisation;
- It imposes punishment on journalist for unfavourable reporting;
- It continues to make clear that criticism of certain fundamental policies are off limits;
- It has set up numerous official journalists' associations;
- The government exploits a longstanding hierarchical relationship among Chinese print and broadcast entities.

(3) The Party is in a dilemma in funding and controlling media.

Later, based upon these premises, Todd concluded that “powerful domestic institutions continue to constrain the media”.

Basically, these findings are acceptable except that some of them are simplistic. In fact, all the top leaders of all media industries are appointed by the Party and/or governments at different levels, but on the whole, no close hierarchical relationship exists within the Chinese media world. Anyway, Todd is wise enough to have observed some forceful ways for the Party to dominate media.

7. Bias

The article reflects some bias against China. First, some people seem to believe that no change should take place in China, under the thumb of the Communist Party. Therefore, once they noticed some change, they would make a fuss over it. For example, the research seemed surprised to hear that “Chinese television views were ‘more credible’ or ‘much more credible’ than ten years earlier.” In this case, he is more likely to overstate the change in China’s media. As a matter of fact, the situation in China is not so pessimistic as some Westerners imagine, nor so optimistic as others believe.

8. Conclusion

Todd believes the all his evidence reflects a mixed picture of China’s media. On the one hand, the media are growing in size, diversity and autonomy. On the other hand, the regime is trying to find ways to cope with these trends. Todd suggests that over the next few years the Chinese media can be measured by two yardsticks: credibility and autonomy. He later explained why and how the credibility and autonomy of the Chinese media is challenged, but he didn’t mention why these two indicators are the yardsticks of the Chinese media.

The last two paragraphs are the gem of the long report, which contain the weightiest conclusion:

- (1) Complete media autonomy from the State is highly unlikely to materialize in China in the near future.
- (2) The evolutionary reform in the media now taking place will continue.
- (3) The dynamic tension between the media and the State is likely to continue in China well into the future.

Todd didn’t make detailed discussion why he thought complete media autonomy from the State is highly unlikely to materialize in China in the near future. His judgement seems, at least to me, very arbitrary and not so convincing. Also, I want to clarify that the current constitution of China has already stipulated the freedom of expression and press, and that the issue is, in practice, to what extent the stipulations are respected and observed. In other words, to rule by law or by rulers, that’s the question.

Although Todd made some mistakes in accounting for the change in China’s media, it doesn’t prevent him from inferring some reasonable findings. Even examined today, most of his results are still acceptable.

References

1. Hazelbarth, Todd (1997) “The Chinese Media: More Autonomous and Diverse, Within Limits”. <http://www.cia.gov/csi/monograph425050797/5.htm>
2. Kalathil, Shanthi. “Chinese Media and the Information Revolution”. http://www.ceip.org/files/publications/kalathil_harvardasia.asp
3. “China's Media Rush”. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2001/Dec/23061.htm>