

# Effective regulatory frameworks for constructive journalism: a study of China's media systems

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## ABSTRACT

Journalism practice in China is unique and different from the rest of the other countries in the world. Many scholars have attributed this to the effective regulatory systems and the structure of the media system thus the six forces controlling media space in China. This study adopted a qualitative condensed thematic analysis technique through in-depth interviews to examine how the regulatory framework in China affects the media ecosystem and constructive journalism practice. Through the snowball technique of sampling, the researchers collected data from fifteen (N=15) senior media professionals working within private and state-owned news outlets in China, to find answers to the nature of the media system in China and how this system has influenced and shaped constructive journalism practice during the COVID-19 pandemic between November and December 2021. One of the key findings of this study indicates that the robust media regulatory system practice in China has resulted in effective interactions among stakeholders, media houses, and journalists within the Chinese media system, which has significantly contributed to attaining effective constructive journalism practices. Again, our findings suggest that the effectiveness and constant interactions of the six forces of the Chinese media system have also helped enforce professionalism, dedication to duty, and patriotism among journalists and different media outlets in China. Finally, our study reveals that the Chinese Media giants such as China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Central Television (CCTV), and China Radio International (CRI) which serve millions of global audiences are very factual in their reportage. To avoid fake news in their reportage, CGTN and China Radio International, for instance, have designed specialized fact-checking programs for their news stories before airing them for public consumption.

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## 1. Introduction

Journalism has an important impact on the development of any society due to its great power to change individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and public opinion [1],[2]. Constructive Journalism practice in China is unique and has attracted global recognition. Pan notes that constructive journalism practice and media systems within China are quite different from that of other nations across the globe [3]. Sullivan observes that the media system and the practice of journalism in China involve a combination of diverse media principles as well as the outcome of the history related to Chinese civilization [4]. According to Luo the Chinese media system has the following forces; the Chinese

government, the Communist party, private businesses, media professionals, and the Chinese culture [5].

By highlighting the pivotal role played by the party in what is perceived as positive reporting by Chinese media, Murphy brought together the three forces of the state, the party, and the state-owned media [6]. As a result, there have been significant public disputes (online) over the state's influence and regulatory instruments towards investigative journalism up until 2009 when microblogs became widespread. Even the requirement for political education to assist journalists in their reporting had been included in this. Although some earlier studies had described the future of constructive journalism in China as "precarious," citing pressures from the state Tong and Sparks took a more broad view into the opportunities that were created by a provision of the law, pointing out significant institutional changes that ran parallel with the party-press system [7].

Currently, the diverse roles played by these different forces ensure the effective practice of constructive journalism in China. The media systems within China and journalism are independent bodies or groups which help in shaping constructive journalism practice [8]. This paper discusses how the effective regulatory systems thus the media forces in China have promoted constructive journalism and the global concerns and issues relating to the credibility of the Chinese media system and journalism practice. The core objective of this study is to assess how the media regulatory framework of the Chinese media system influences constructive journalism practice, especially during the peak of COVID-19 in China. This article, therefore, reviewed empirical and theoretical literature on the regulatory frameworks of the Chinese media systems, the Chinese Media Systems, and Constructive Journalism, the Chinese media system, new media, and constructive journalism practice. Furthermore, this paper also reviewed the literature on the Chinese media systems, new media, global drive, the Chinese media system, journalism, issues of credibility, and the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Therefore, the central question of this study seeks to address the impact of the forces mentioned above (the government, the Communist party, private businesses, media professionals, and the Chinese culture) on the concept of constructive journalism within the Chinese media systems

## 2. Review of related literature

### 2.1. Regulatory framework of the Chinese media systems

According to Zhao the Chinese media system is moderately closed, with no less than six forces influencing media as well as constructive journalism, which is conducted synchronously through the use of various organizational social media platforms, which may be chosen by the Capital force, the Party Force, the citizen's pillar, the State institutional pillars, and the various cultural influences [9].

Party Force can be described as the influence as well as the control exerted by the Communist Party of China (CPC), which is generally directed via the Central Propaganda Department. The State institutional pillar, on the other hand, can be defined as the power exercised by the national government, which is embedded in organizations through regulations that are communicated through the use of various administrative layers that operate under the national government, starting from the country's provincial, municipal to the county or prefectural levels. According to Stockmann, Yanqiu and Matingwina, when various scholars assess the Government Force and the Party Force together as well as examine their shared contribution to the Chinese media system and journalism practice, they often describe it as authoritarianism or the Party-State mode [10][11].

Capital Force forms a major impetus that arose as a result of the free market idea, and which also forms one of the major players within the Chinese media following the opening-up policy of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, when the media in China discovered a stronger motivation to accrue profits utilizing being media buyers, the various capital owners greatly invested money in the media business through various media content. Various scholars realized that this particular force had a very strong effect on the Chinese media system. The above-mentioned forces are significantly examined by Robinson and are considered as the major forces impacting the media, with scholars labeling the communication media system that only integrates the three forces as a "Marketized Authoritarianism" or "Authoritarianism" [12].

The media experts or professionals who work for the various media organizations form the Professional Force, which forms the only important inside-out power influencing the media. These

media professionals or experts do not necessarily hold the key decision-making roles, but they form part of key media operators, which include producers, directors, and editors-in-chief, among others [13]. As noted by McIntyre and Gyldensted, they are often trained as journalists with curricula that are similar to those of Western countries [14].

Thussu et.al states that the Individual Force describes the significant influence over various media that comes from individual citizens [15]. Citizens, usually in form of groups or the public (as audiences or readers) may acquire influence from the media or exert pressure on a given media. Indeed, with the growth of the internet as well as mobile internet, citizens may access various media with ease, interacting with conventional media, or developing their content.

Faure and Fang pointed out that culture forms an essential intangible influencer of media within China [16]. Over many years of Chinese history, the Chinese people have developed a very strong culture and have also established their moral codes of conduct even as Chinese society develops and progresses. In China, the element of culture plays a more observable role as compared to other nations. For instance, the Spring Gala Festival that is broadcasted on CCTV1 is widely perceived as a new and essential cultural element. Because culture is not easy to quantify, this paper will establish a qualitative framework. The paper will also trigger research relating to how culture may be incorporated into a model in a meaningful way.

Zhang and Hu also proposed that all forces that influence the media in China are generated by the people [17]. Except for the cultural force, every force is generated by a given group of individuals, whereas the Cultural Force is generated by all the people who are directly influenced by the Chinese culture. The individuals who join a given party, for instance, become members of that party and create what is termed as the Party Force. The government, on the other hand, does not work without the officials working for it. Civil servants and government officials form the Government Force. Finally, as noted by Becard and Menechelli Filho, the individuals who pay for the media expect their advertisements and sponsorships to be published in the media. Given this, media buyers form the group that provides Capital Force [18].

## **2.2. The Chinese media systems and constructive journalism**

Constructive journalism is generally not a unique concept to the Chinese and is not common in many countries, especially in Africa. However, constructive journalism is more widespread in China than in any region of the world [11]. As highlighted by Hermas, Pan, Zhao, Becard and Menechelli Filho, the Chinese description of journalism seems to be very different compared to most countries of the globe [1][3][9][18]. Most significantly, the Chinese news media is greatly controlled by the nation's communist party. Given this, it does not enjoy the editorial freedom that radio, newspapers, as well as other news media outlets, enjoy in many other nations. Nonetheless, Tong, Sparks, Faure and Fang cite that beyond the observable political suppression, the Chinese tend to hold a different view as far as the role of journalism in society is concerned [7][16]. Indeed, instead of serving in an adversarial or investigative role, media in China is projected to be more solutions-oriented in terms of its reporting.

To clarify the various journalistic differences that may not be exposed by employing the state-policy press model only, McIntyre and Gyldensted, Thussu et.al, assessed the important role played by professionalism within the new media model apart from the normative model [14][15]. On the other hand, when arguing the post-Soviet communication model, Purbrick argued the absence of journalistic professionalism is a major feature of post-Soviet communication, and professionalism is not useful as far as protecting the media is concerned [19].

A survey investigating the creation of journalistic professionalism ideas or principles among the professionals working within the Chinese media industry. Pan revealed that newspaper professionals rate being "factual and accuracy" as the most significant achievement, with Television professionals, argue "objective reporting as being the major priority [3]. Media professionals also seek other essential career goals, including timeliness, attractiveness, justice, originality, comprehensiveness, balanced reporting, deep investigation, and balanced reporting. The professionals who work for a newspaper, as well as television firms, reacted somewhat differently to these particular indexes, however, they both cited "balanced reporting" as the lowest in terms of importance.

Kramp and Loosen observes that constructive journalism within China has helped to regain the engagement of audiences, enhancing social as well as economic development, encouraging social

stability as well as unity, in addition to helping restore fundamental values relating to journalism through the means of contextual reporting [2]. Overall, the media philosophy that significantly influences the Chinese media system, as well as journalism, entails a mixture of authoritarianism, communism, Chinese Culturalism, and Democratic Participant. Each of these forces not only competes against one another within the social system but also cooperates.

Constructive journalism entails applying various positive psychology approaches to the news process. The application of these techniques is aimed at strengthening the field in addition to facilitating creative news stories, in addition to performing journalism's essential functions. It is the adoption of positive psychological techniques that makes constructive journalism distinctive within China. The theoretical basis of this particular paper is founded on the media effects theories thus agenda-setting and framing theory, as well as positive psychology theory applied in journalism [16]. This study will however apply agenda-setting and framing theory as the two main theoretical bases.

### 2.3. The Chinese media systems, new media, and global drive

The introduction of New Media, especially the advent of digital media and other social media has compelled the Chinese media systems and journalists to introduce innovative means of expanding their global coverage and audience [19]. In 2016 prominent global Chinese media outlets such as TV/ Xinhua News Agency re-launched, rebranded, and named "News China" [Xinhua]. Social media platforms accounts such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube were created to showcase to the world the journalism practice in China. The re-branding efforts by Xinhua News Agency have increased global social media flowers, thus 70 million on Facebook, 12.6 million on Twitter, and 861,000 subscribers on YouTube as of May 31, 2021. Other prominent English newspapers and media outlets under the People's Daily Group, such as CGTN, China Daily, and People Daily had 90, 84, and 72 million Facebook followers respectively in May 2021. The forces of the Chinese media systems, journalists, and media organizations in China have been able to capture the global community's attention because of their periodic news updates in Chinese and English, which attracts social media users globally [3].

*"Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their tentacle"* [President Xi Jinping, February 2016].

These words from President Xi represent the Chinese government's commitment to resource and brand some selected Chinese media systems, and journalists for its global influence campaign. To capture the global community's attention, the Chinese media established offices across all regions of the world. The aim of Chinese media going global is to give alternative insights on stories within China and Chinese perspectives on global issues and strengthen cooperation with other countries of the world. Some of the foreign bureaus are CCTV America in Washington D.C, CCTV Africa in Nairobi, Kenya, which started in 2012, and in 2018 launches CCTV Europe with its hub in London [17]. Another giant step in the Chinese media bid to "go global" is the introduction and publishing of six editorials by the China Daily in the following parts of the world; Africa, the USA, Europe, Asia, and Latin America [19].

Besides, the Chinese government's agenda to resource the only media outlets belonging to the state in the "Chinese media go global campaign" has also employed another dimension to expand, through the Chinese Provincial media networks, to broaden its market share globally. As far back as 2012, the Shanghai media group introduced its China Business Network TV channel on Star hub TV of Singapore. Other very well-recognized provincial TV is the Beijing TV, Guangdong TV, Jiangsu TV, and Hunan TV, which have gained extensive global viewership due to their partnership with other western satellite TV content providers. In the area of world entertainment, Zhejiang TV is noted for projecting the Chinese entertainment industry to the rest of the world. The channel showcases the Chinese entertainment industry to the overseas audience, through its flagship program *"The Voice of China show"* [20].

An issue that has generated a lot of debate among media experts in China and beyond is whether new apps like Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (BAT) can be counted as media. While some experts believe they are media, others think they're not. Those who classify BAT as media are of the view that, BAT are content producers and describe them as "super-platform apps" and offer users a variety of content [21].



Becard and Menechelli Filho, for instance, cited that when Chinese Apps such as BAT are made global, there is the possibility of increasing non-China users and giving such foreign users the chance to learn more about China-related news [18]. For example, [businessofapps.org](http://businessofapps.org) reported that, as of April 2021, WeChat had registered over 1 billion account holders globally, and the App translated into more than 20 language versions in 200 countries and regions. Alibaba's Tmall has also expanded to other parts of the globe. According to [epic.org](http://epic.org), another Chinese app that has gone global and serves more than 30 million users every month is Baidu. Baidu, which is considered by many experts as a replica of Google, has been adopted and translated into many local languages in countries like Brazil, Malaysia, Egypt, and Thailand.

#### 2.4. The Chinese media system, journalism, and issues of credibility

Within China, these media houses are controlled by the central authority and operate with little or no opposition, this comfort created as a result of its domestic dominance has made it extremely difficult for those media outlets to compete with other leading global media giants, who are a bit independent in their operations, thereby raising the issue of credibility [17]. Some of the Chinese media houses dispute these claims and believe that the global West criticisms levelled against the Chinese media are baseless and lack merit [17]. For instance, “*foreign forces*” are accused of being behind a typical internal issue like the Hong Kong protest without advancing any concrete evidence to that effect [22].

Notwithstanding the massive injection of billions of dollars into training expert journalists and establishing credible international media news outlets such as China Global Television Network (CGTN), Global Times, and China International Radio to tell the “Chinese story”, China’s efforts according to some media experts have yielded little results at global information “war” front with other “media imperialism from the global West” on telling the beautiful Chinese story to the rest of the world [23][24].

According to Mast et.al believe that the Chinese government's over-reliance on the state media to propagate its foreign policies and improve global competitiveness is alleged to have resulted in the loss of some level of credibility of most Chinese media giants and defeated the Chinese Media ‘Go-Global agenda’ [25]. The Chinese government uses public media houses that it managed to enhance the country's global image. Many media scholars hold the view that this “excessive control and monitoring” of the public media houses by the Chinese media system, according to the global west, has made most Chinese media outlets lose their credibility on the global stage. With this kind of assessment by the global west in mind, CGTN, a Chinese global media, for instance, has tried over the years to claim independence in its publications and deviate from the censorship of the Chinese central authority. The absence of editorial direction in most of the Chinese media outlets implies that staff, always have to come out with what is ideal and in the interest of the central authority as well as follow the laid down procedures in reporting stories, based on approvals from superiors within the media organizations [25].

Shambaugh argues that the paternalistic mindset and the fact that the CCP uses the Chinese media as governance and a revolutionary tool, globalizing the Chinese media houses have faced the challenges of leaving or abandoning the dictates of the one-way or top-down approach to broadcasting news [26]. These criticisms by the global west are vindicated by the words of a Chinese media expert David Shambaugh who stated that all state-owned media outlets in China have adopted the existing domestic propaganda guidelines and try to export them globally.

Hartig Falk argued that, despite the professional training and international exposure of most of China’s leading journalists, the politically motivated environment guides most of the news coverage and communication [20]. At any time, those media outlets in China must be governed by the bureaucratic processes laid-out out by the central authority in news reportage. The political leaders have given instructions that all media houses under the control of the CCP must be run by the party, speak for the party, and protect the party's commanding authority and unity.

It is a fact that over a few years, the Chinese media has expanded its presence globally. However, the issues of credibility remain a significant concern, especially in liberal democratic countries. The lessons from the fast-growing local social media environment have reawakened the Chinese media outlets to ensure credibility. In recent times, the Chinese leadership has applauded the media integration to enhance the growth of other media outlets to foster greater inclusion and credibility of

the Chinese media abroad. This integration initiative of the Chinese media is backed by a recent study by the BBC in 2019, which discovered that Chinese diplomatic missions manage 55 Twitter accounts [26][27][28].

During the recent Taiwan elections and Hong Kong protests, multiple Facebook and Twitter accounts were regarded as significant elements of China's misinformation campaign. Some scholars argue that the Chinese government's underlying propaganda precautions actively undermine media credibility, which is invariably eroding China's image within the global community [28].

Hartig Falk cited that, if the state fails to block the frequent dissemination of inaccurate information, political interference will become pervasive, which will potentially lead to distrust of China, which might generate and lead to the widespread possibility of neglecting pro-China media content as propaganda, preventing Chinese media outlets from showcasing the Chinese identity to the rest of the world [20]. The Chinese publicity department's introduction of Chinese soft power resources such as the internet is also much considered a means of scaling up the Chinese propaganda set-up.

## 2.5. Theoretical underpinnings of the study

Media scholars have always argued that constructive journalism and media systems are located within the theoretical foundations of media effects theories. The specific theories are agenda-setting and framing theories, due to their relative importance and application in covering news stories in a more balanced and positive way.

Agenda setting theory is used to examine the extent to which the media influences the claim relevance of some specific issues within the public domain, encouraging emphasis on such issues and described as first-level agenda setting [29][30][31]. Agenda setting forms the attitudes, Wu et.al, described this phenomenon as “*based on the considerations that are most accessible*” in peoples' minds (also called salience) [32]. The second-level agenda setting was also identified and explains the features or attributes of a particular “object” for instance the trait of political actors. This indicates that the two perspectives indicated above are the ‘object’, and the effective perspectives and are the emotional qualities of the ‘object’. The resultant effects can be negative, positive, or neutral. Some media experts believe that the media has the potential to transfer these features of “object” to the general public just as to say the salience of an issue [31][32]. This is a clear indication that, if journalists report on an issue in a particular means, it may help the general public to remember a particular instance. In sum, agenda-setting is described as what the news media or journalists cover. Constructive journalism seeks to encourage more coverage of socially important issues and to engage the public on the critical issues that are covered. To contribute to a very healthy debate, constructive journalism enables the practicing journalist to enhance salience with issues that are of paramount importance to the needs of society. Media experts assumed that in adopting salience accessibility and importance are achieved.

The framing theory on the other hand gives details on how particular issues of interest are covered. The individual understanding of public issues is influenced by the media. How a journalist reports or writes about an “object” affects how the population regards the “object” [32][33]. “*The text contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments*” [33]. Scheufele argues that also the ‘communicators’, in this context journalists, use frames to select the place to put attention [33].

Also, frames are used with the aid of the receivers, in this context the readers of the news, to make a feel of the statistics presented. Infrequent Kramp and Loosen claims that “culture might be defined as the empirically demonstrable set of frequent frames exhibited in the discourse and questioning of most humans in a social grouping” [2]. This capability that framing exists on each macro level and micro level [2]. It is this macrolevel that differs framing from agenda-setting. On the micro-level, second-level agenda-setting and framing are overlapping though, in view that this stage talks about frames or traits used utilizing journalists in a text. The characteristics of an ‘object’ can be seen as a frame due to the fact it is greater about how something or anybody is portrayed in the media than what is portrayed [31].

The similarity between second-level agenda-setting and framing depends on what definition of framing is used [31]. If a body is seen as a social construct, for example, distinctive sorts of

statements, it cannot be seen as second-level agenda-setting. A statement is after all not a characteristic belonging to an 'object'. A statement such as "climate trade is now not real", can be known as a frame however now not second-level agenda-setting. A-frame is in this context a broader concept, like a "moral comparison or a causal reasoning" [31]. Second-level agenda-setting does now not go this far, it solely focuses on the salience of a characteristic. Constructive journalism objectives for a broader view of issues, and the coverage of more than one perspective. It wishes to grant its readers not solely problems but additionally (possible) options for these problems. As Zhang puts it, constructive journalism frames issues differently [34]. It emphasizes options for the future, hope, and recovery. This thus mainly touches upon the frames used with the aid of the communicators and in the text. By using these frames, the public must get a higher perception of the complexity of problems. Based on the literature reviewed, the following research questions will guide this study:

## 2.6. Research Questions

**RQ1.** To what extent have the six forces of the Chinese media system influenced constructive journalism?

**QR2.** To what extent has the Chinese media systems helped shape professional journalism practice in China?

**QR3.** What are the Challenges to implementing constructive journalism practice in China?

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1. Sampling

This study used the qualitative condensed thematic analysis technique through in-depth interviews to collect qualitative information or data on how the media systems in China have shaped the practice of constructive journalism during the COVID-19 period. The snowball technique of sampling was adopted to collect information from fifteen (N=15) senior media professionals working within private and state-owned news media outlets in China. According to Sadler et.al, this snowball sampling technique is effective in helping the individual researching to establish the characteristics relating to a population that the researcher (s) was not aware of [35]. Interviews were organized based on the time proposed by the respondents. About (N=15) journalists and media outlets were interrogated for two months (November to December 2020). Unlike larger samples utilized in quantitative research studies, this particular study employed the use of a qualitative technique for a comprehensive understanding through the involvement of a purposive sampling of various journalists as well as other media professionals [36].

### 3.2. Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were distributed between privately-owned and state-owned media outlets to acquire various insights on constructive journalism. Each interviewee responded to a set of semi-structured questions as well as follow-up spontaneous questions based on their responses as well as experiences. Professional journalists with between five to ten years of job experience (reporters, news editors, content managers, news producers, and digital media managers) in TV, Radio, as well as print, were interviewed. This facilitated the acquisition of an insightful vision regarding how the media system in China has shaped the practice of constructive journalism during the COVID-19 period. Respondents were reached either via email, phone, or face-to-face. The reporting of the findings was done using the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative research (COREQ) checklist [37]. The final interview data was sorted using condensed or consolidated thematic analysis technique and inductive coding procedure for effective analysis.

### 3.3. Measures

The measure identified two key variables as the primary qualitative outcomes; *the influence of the six forces of the Chinese media system on constructive journalism, and the potential challenges of implementing constructive Journalism practice in China*. The two primary qualitative outcomes were assessed with comments and responses from the respondents and reported in a condensed or consolidated in the research findings section.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The following profile was identified after the coding of the data. Based on the research questions the researchers also obtained the following themes from the respondents: See table 1;

**Table 1.** Profile of respondents

SN	Province	Municipality/ District	Name of media outlet	Participant (Job title)	Sex
1	Beijing	Beijing	China Global Television Network (CGTN)	News Editor	Female
2	Beijing	Beijing	China Central Television (CCTV)	Producer	Male
3	Shanghai	Shanghai	People's Daily	Editor	Male
4	Guangdong	Guangzhou	China Daily	News Desk Editor	
5	Shanghai	Shanghai	Economic Daily	Reporter	Male
6	Taijin	Taijin	Xinhua News	Online news editor	Female
7	Beijing	Beijing	China International Radio	Broadcast Journalist	Male
8	Beijing	Beijing	Beijing TV	News Correspondent	Male
9	Guangdong	Guangzhou	Guangdong TV	Broadcast Journalist	Female
10	Jiangsu	Nanjing	Jiangsu TV	Editor/Reporter	Female
11	Hunan	Changsha	Hunan TV	Broadcast Journalist	Male
12	Zhejiang	Hangzhou	Zhejiang TV	Former Senior Journalist	Male
13	Beijing	Beijing	China-Africa Review	Social Media Editor	Female
14	Hubei	Wuhan	South China Morning Post	Editor	Male
15	Guangdong	Guangzhou	Shenzhen Daily	Editor/Reporter	Female

### 4.1. RQ1: How do the six forces of the Chinese media system influence constructive journalism?

The first research question was aimed at soliciting opinions from media practitioners in China on how the six forces in the Chinese media system shape constructive journalism practice in China. The following were the themes and condensed or consolidated responses from the journalist.

#### 1) Theme 1: The Chinese media have promoted the general welfare of Chinese society

Constructive journalism in the six forces of the Chinese media system as well as the Organizations that are associated with media activities have a role to promote the welfare of the citizens in Chinese society. The following are some of the responses from some of the interviewees:

"...The six forces in the Chinese media system and constructive journalism are likely to be a source of enlightenment especially when it also covers domestic issues. It can also be a source of domestic enlightenment by providing solutions that can bring about the well-being of society[...] For instance, by covering COVID-19 in China, the media can teach the Chinese citizens some of the safety precautions to adopt in order not to limit the spread of COVID-19..."

"...Imparting new ideas and enhancing positive behavior can be termed as constructive and by doing this, the well-being of the people is taken care of in the society. This form of journalism can be of great importance compared to the kind of media that puts much emphasis on sad tidings that instill worry among the citizens..."

"...According to another journalist, focusing on crisis and painting a dark picture without necessarily providing the necessary solution brings about frustration and disengagement among the audience instead of encouraging them to develop their society...."

The role of six forces in the Chinese media system, as well as constructive journalism, matches with the definition of Ulrik which defines constructive news as news that highlights socially responsible roles that aim at improving society's well-being [38].



“...This is the kind of journalism we practice here in China[...] Our fast and rapid technological and economic development is generally attributed to the media system kept in place to market China to the global community...”

*2) Theme 2: Serving the interest of the Chinese public*

Among the themes that were identified by the interviewees regarding how the six forces in the Chinese media system shape constructive journalism is the central issue of serving the interest of the Chinese public. The interpretation of the interviewees is that serving the interests of the public entails empowering the audiences with the required information. Below are some of the condensed responses that were received from the interviewees:

“...It entails a purposeful form of press whereby the goals cannot contradict the already set standards[...] The interviewee explained that Chinese journalists are supposed to be strictly responsible during this period not just during the reporting of the issues that are current but they should also be able to explain how the new stories can change the lives of the people in the society[...] To be specific, reporting about the inauguration of the electric power plant, which is an important aspect in the lives of the public, they should be able to explain how it will influence the economy and the ways through which employment opportunities will be created ...”

“...Therefore, making reports on developmental projects should not be the end of a story but the beginning of greater things ahead. By doing this, the audience is well-updated on the level of progress and facts so that people are well-integrated within the society...”

The idea is to enforce socially responsible reporting to enhance constructive journalism to ensure that it resonates well with the idea of researchers like Hanusch who pointed out that journalism should not just be a distant observer but also play a critical role in social development through contextual reporting that serves audiences and societies [39].

*3) Theme 3: Audience engagement*

The respondents unanimously agreed that unprofessional coverage done by media organizations contributed to a negative reputation which consequently affected the reputation as well as the credibility of the media industry. The following are the condensed responses:

“...the violations that took place in the past years during news coverage cannot be overlooked. Audiences have become of age and are smarter as far as the understanding of the messages communicated is concerned. This has affected their trust in the outlets and pushed them towards other platforms...”

One journalist pointed out constructive journalism can ament the relationship between the audience and the media organizations. Some of the key responses received during the interviews include;

“...I believe constructive journalism can be the only way through which the audience can be brought back to believe in media information...”

This confirms the findings of Terry that discovered that constructive journalism has the mandate of providing positive stories that can effectively engage the audience [40].

## **4.2 RQ2: To what extent has the Chinese media systems helped shape professional journalism practice in China?**

According to the responses from the participants of this study, the Chinese media system has greatly influenced professional journalism practice in China. Amidst some identified challenges Chinese journalists suggest that the practice of professional journalism has been very successful in China due to the effective regulatory framework within the media system. The Chinese media system has also allowed the integration of traditional and social media to be able to organize a constructive and interactive communication model which can guarantee the audiences some considerable engagement. By doing this, the well-being of society will be promoted. From the analysis of the condensed responses from the respondents, the following are some of the key themes of how the Chinese media systems have helped promote professional journalism:

*1) Theme 1: Engaging content*

The effective media system regulation in China has greatly helped in ensuring that the journalist comes out with engaging content. This has attracted a high number of followers on various media outlets. The number of subscribers together with their engagement in the process which entails

transmitting messages regarding various political, economic, and social concerns has also increased over the past years. For instance, one, senior journalist remarked:

“...The media system here in China has built a strong professional journalist. It has provided the opportunity for ancient media platforms to come up with a strong presence [...] Both professional and constructive journalism is not just about coming up with content and posting it on social media, or simply promoting content and attracting traffic...”

“... rather, it entails ensuring that the information that is fed to the public has a positive impact. People should not just log on to the page, go through the content and log out. The content should be engaging, should be trustworthy and the audience should be able to interact with it accordingly....”

#### 2) Theme 2: Audience segmentation

The second theme was highlighted by the respondents regarding how the China media system has influenced journalism practice and is mainly targeting and creating segments that aim at increasing the engagement of the audience with the content to be able to enhance interactivity, build trust and improve growth within the community. A major condensed response by a senior journalist is as follows:

“...The China media system has enabled traditional media houses to mainstream social media platforms and acts as an audience analytical tool that can look at the behavior, and comments, interact and begin to create stories that will positively influence their lives [...] The proposed strategy ensures that the audience comes up together and that their trust is regained through the implementation of constructive journalism. This is achieved through having open channels with the citizens, media as well as other institutions for the sake of the development of the society...”

### 4.3. RQ3: Challenges encountered during the implementation of constructive journalism practice in China?

After explaining how the Chinese media system has helped shape the level of professional constructive journalism in China, the researchers sought to find out the challenges that could be faced during the implementation of constructive journalism in the third question. Three common themes that came out from the interviews as the potential challenges to implementing constructive journalism in China are; government regulation, pressure from the commercial sectors, and lack of trust from the audience.

#### 1) Theme 1: Government power

All journalists interviewed argued that the structure of media can pose a great challenge to the implementation of constructive journalism. The following were some responses from the journalists:

“...the structure of the organization can enforce some form of vertical communication in a newsroom because, in such a model, directions come from the top-level towards the middle then to the lower managerial level[...] this is carried out in a controlled manner to ensure that the national policies of the government are adhered to....”

“... in this kind of vertical communication, there is an enforcement of some protocols in the news that mainly cover officials and their activities that are known to greatly challenge constructive journalism approaches [...] Nevertheless, it is essential to note that some journalists see social media as a chance where they can share their concerns, and as a result, vertical communication can be challenged and the mainstream media can also be influenced in terms of their news agenda...”

“...the government power not only on national media organizations but also on the private ones, which makes them practice self-censorship as they become meticulous about the wording of the news to avoid being exposed to any kind of penalties...”

#### 2) Theme 2: Commercial pressure

Among the journalists, it is believed that news coverage from private media organizations is mainly influenced by advertisements because through the advertisements, they are able to get some revenue. This factor keeps it away from professional coverage and therefore the idea of constructive journalism is a mirage. The following were some of the condensed responses from the interviewees:

“...a lot of competition is being experienced between private media which mainly depends on advertisement as their only source of funding[...] some organizations end up providing coverage that is only aimed at attracting audiences and advertisers. This, therefore, means that covering the suffering of people and their problems is just one aspect of the story...”

*“...it should not, therefore, go on for two hours without providing the possible solution to the problems affecting the people [...] there has to be some balance during the creation of the story for the sake of commercial benefit [...] this will guarantee continued viewing and listening among the audience...”*

This finding resonates well with the previous research which found that excessive coverage of negative news can make people lose interest and eventually become disinterested in information being passed across [43]. Another Journalist points out that;

*“...the pessimistic picture which is drawn by various private organizations that are only interested in commercial gains can easily lead to disappointments on the part of the audience [...] these challenges one of the main functions of constructive journalism which entails engaging the audience regarding the positive aspects of the general public...”*

### 3) Theme 3: Lack of trust from the audience

Though a number of the respondents believe that constructive journalism has a great role in influencing audience engagement, they have a feeling that it is likely to take time before media credibility, which was initially greatly affected in the past years finds a footing. Among the condensed responses that were received include the following: A news editor pointed out that; “...the audience is always the victims of unprofessional coverage [...] this eventual dissatisfaction with the quality of information shared...”

According to the editor, “...the flaws that are there in the news coverage are mainly brought about by anonymous sources and reporting of unbalanced stories [...] there are also cases of provision of opinionated news[...] this kind of trend has greatly affected the level of trust and can only regain ground after efforts are put in to restore the confidence and trust of the audience...”

Most of the respondents indicated that there is a need for intensive training while introducing the concept of constructive journalism because forms the basis upon which a strong foundation is built. Since 2008, the Chinese media industry has expanded and continues to gain prominence. The Beijing Olympics games held in 2008 have been described by Terry as the game-changer in the Chinese media systems' quest to reach a global audience [40]. In 2009, it was reported that the government spent \$6 billion on state-owned media outlets [17]. The issue of funding is fundamental to the growth of China's media industry and has strengthened its global presence [17]. The Chinese media systems and the media industry, in general, have expanded to the admiration of the global community. China has developed a very robust internet infrastructure aimed at supporting its media system and global media expansion agenda under the theme China media “Go-Global”[27],[41].

The theme for the large-scale expansion of the media abroad is termed “China media Go-Global”. These massive and unprecedented global initiatives embarked on by the Chinese government, and other Chinese media giants have attracted many countries, especially the global west. The Chinese President, Xi Jinping, stated at the 19<sup>th</sup> national congress emphasize that “China will develop its ability to engage international communication to tell the world the China story, present a multi-dimensional picture of the Chinese society and enhance the country's cultural soft power”. This paper, therefore, highlights the pragmatic measures adopted by the Chinese government to build its unique global media brand, and influence, under the theme “China Media Go-Global agenda”, and the conflicting issues of the credibility raised by the competing global west against the Chinese Media in the global context.

The results from the study indicate that the beliefs among journalists about the necessity of the implementation of constructive journalism in China are heavily influenced by effective regulatory systems and robust Chinese media systems. The systems have helped to streamline journalism practice in China to do away with unprofessional coverage and audience migration in constructive journalism practice. Journalists have a feeling that there is great importance that is attached to constructive journalism in China. According to them, constructive journalism promotes developmental behavior, serves the interests of the public, and promotes audience engagement. They, however, point out that it is constrained by various forms of what they describe as “positive regulation” which are still practiced over news content. There is also a lack of trust among the audience. From the interviews carried out, it was discovered that journalists from both the government as well as privately run organizations believe in the critical roles played by constructive journalism practice in China, respondents hold the view that they trust the way constructive journalism has helped China foster development and manage the COVID-19 pandemic creditably in 2020. Another finding from this study shows that private-sector journalism mainly dwells on the

engagement of the audience as well as interactivity. This finding is in line with a previous study by Terry who confirmed that audience engagement was a very integral part of any effective constructive journalism practice [40].

This study reported that journalists see the Chinese media system as the idea behind constructive journalism practice in China which has over a few years help to develop journalists in terms of their professionalism. However, the specific context through which the media functions require a unique way of implementing the strategies [5]. Another finding from this study shows that journalists believe that constructive journalism could be more efficient when implemented by way of utilizing the various social media platforms as well as their high number of users. According to them, the most significant aspect is the interaction with the audience through the integration of both traditional as well as social media platforms. This can guarantee direct feedback from the audience and can help in avoiding the misuse of the word constructive. All the above findings resonate with the previous study by Zhang on constructive journalism and audience interaction [34]. The findings of this study again, reported that the implementation of the constructive journalism strategies that were proposed might lead to the adoption of a different pace in various media platforms. However, this will be dependent on the level of readiness of each media organization to ensure that there is an actual interactive presence on the various social media platforms. It should be understood that there is no perfect way of implementing the strategy that was proposed in the newsroom, however, there must be a transformation in the ways through which information and news are gathered, planned, and produced. Adequate exploration of the possibility of introducing constructive ideas is significant. A good constructive journalism strategy might be able to fit the newsroom culture and come up with a formidable communication structure.

The challenges faced by Chinese media in this period of the COVID-19 global pandemic and other criticisms from the global west require a constructive and interactive form of journalism that will be quick to respond to the present-day social as well as a political milieu. These kinds of models can be designed in such a way that they are socially responsible. This can be achieved through encouraging communication between people who make crucial decisions and those who take part in bringing communities together so that the media performance can be improved and not just follow the traditional structures as well as business models that have been in place.

## 5. Conclusion

Under the able leadership of President Xi Jinping, the media and journalists in China over the years have received a massive financial and political boost over the last few years. As the government continues to invest both human and capital resources in improving the media and promoting the Chinese media system for this global influence, its success is mixed. While some experts all over the world think the entire Chinese media and constructive journalism practice has been mostly successful, scholars especially from the global west hold contrary views. It is imperative to acknowledge that the interventions put forward by the Chinese government and the other forces of the Chinese media systems to market its media globally have social, political, and economic implications and have yielded some considerable and remarkable benchmarks and successes over the past few years. A few aspects of the Chinese Media systems and constructive journalism practice, especially the issues of the Chinese media system's credibility, need some strategic policy adjustments and education. In terms of improving China's global image, and constructive journalism practice many experts hold the view, that the media influence campaign embarked on by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has achieved the most exceptional positive outcome, despite other contrary perceptions by the global west. It can therefore be concluded that the influence of the Chinese media and the white propaganda approach adopted for the Chinese media system and constructive journalism practice is gaining more influence and positive grounds around the globe, especially in continents and countries such as Africa, neighboring Asia-Pacific countries, North America, and Western Europe.

Within the Chinese media system, media is affected by six forces. These forces have been clearly defined in the paper as party, professional, government, cultural, individual, and capital forces, which can physically control the media. Professional and cultural forces can, however, only create some impacts on the media in tangible ways. As far as regulation is concerned, the government force controls the regulations. However, to some extent, other forces influence it in cases where



government officials come up with decisions. It is important to note that the overall media philosophy behind the media system within China is an integration of “liberalism, communism, democratic-participant, and Chinese culturalism”. There is competition among each of the forces within the social system to promote effective constructive journalism practice in China.

Given the Chinese perspective evidenced by the above findings, a future study may investigate how the six forces of constructive journalism and regulatory frameworks can compare with the media landscapes in multi-party states countries that operate a different system from the Socialist government.

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