

Public Opinion – a New Factor Influencing the PRC Press

Martin Brendebach

Summary

Two noteworthy developments fuel the increasing importance of the role public opinion plays in mainland China's press. One is initiated from above: In an effort to counter corruption, the government has permitted the media to report misbehavior by local officials, which, in turn, has encouraged citizens to increasingly turn to newspapers to let them voice their concerns. Another tendency is triggered from below, as an unintended consequence of press commercialization: Since newspapers now rely on advertisement incomes that demand large readerships, audience interests influence editorial decisions to a far greater extent than they did a decade ago. Both factors have to be assessed in order to determine, whether these criticism reports are primarily government- or market-induced.

Current academic debate over public opinion in mainland China and empirical research on readership interests and journalists' professional attitudes indicate that the rising importance of public opinion is primarily due to market competition and less to media policy. Moreover, the results suggest an even greater impact of public opinion on media content in the near future, clearly beyond the importance the leadership intended to attribute to it. This will have consequences for China's transformation process, which leaders in the West will have to consider when making foreign policy decisions regarding China.

1 Introduction¹

Western social scientists analyzing Chinese politics have traditionally regarded statements and reports found in the Chinese media to be the genuine views of the leadership. Reading newspapers² has been, and to a considerable extent still is, an

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² I will focus on the press in this paper, as the general problem of how to deal with public opinion is essentially the same for all media branches: It does not matter whether we study TV-stations, radio broadcasters, book publishers or journalists in the print media. Most of these units relied on direct or indirect state subsidies until the late 1980s, they now have to generate advertisement income to survive on the market, and find themselves in the same dilemma of serving two masters at a time, audiences and political authorities. They compete for advertisement income by attracting large audiences