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Polls in an authoritarian space: reporting and representing public opinion in China

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ABSTRACT

The news media's use of polls is by no means the special preserve of democracies. Using the case of Chinese government's official medium (i.e. the *People's Daily*), this study set out to assess how poll results are communicated to the public in China by examining the presentation of methodological information in its poll stories, and how its web counterpart, the People's Daily Online website, differs in its coverage of polls from a technical point of view. It then examined the outlets' interpretations of poll results and the media logic the coverage implies in comparison with the political logic that shapes poll reporting in China. Further critical discourse analysis reveals the use of authoritarian populist rhetoric as a discursive strategy in both outlets' representation of public opinion. Compared with the print outlet, the online outlet showed a more marked inclination to describe a certain class as 'the people' in anti-elite rhetoric.

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Polls have become a major staple of news reporting worldwide. This underscores the importance of public opinion as a key component in governance (Strömbäck, 2012), but polls are by no means a special preserve of democracies. Polls have also been flourishing in recent years as a journalistic practice in China's authoritarian political culture. Chinese media are actively disseminating opinion poll results in their news, using survey findings to guide their overall coverage, and sponsoring or even conducting their own polls (Li, 2015). In response to the public's desire for online news and entertainment in China, opinion polls have migrated from the broadcast and print platforms to the Internet. With the rapid spread of new information technologies, online surveys came into the public's eye in the 2000s (Zhang & Zhang, 2011). News websites like People's Daily Online (PDO), Xinhua Net, Sina, Netease and Sohu integrate poll results into their news stories.

In democratic countries the media have depended heavily on polls to chart election campaigns, often focusing on horse-race journalism at the cost of slighting essential issues (Brookes, Lewis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). In an authoritarian country like China without universal suffrage, however, the significance of poll reporting obviously

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does not lie in the theoretical or practical impact of public opinion on governance. Rather poll results have symbolic meaning – they to some extent stand in lieu of elections. The bulk of opinion surveys or polls reported by Chinese media revolve around public attitudes toward social and public policy issues, work, and family life (Jiang, 1997). In reporting such poll results the media play a notable role in communicating society's mood to a more general public and to political decision-makers.

Hjarvard (2008) uses the term 'mediatization' to capture a process 'whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic' (p. 113). A burgeoning body of Euro- and U.S.-centric literature has begun to analyze the degree to which it is political or alternatively media logic which influences news coverage of politics in the digitized and convergent media of Western democracies (Esser, 2013). Little is known, however, about the mediatization of politics in authoritarian systems like China's. One key dimension of mediatization is the media's degree of independence from political institutions which falls along a continuum (Strömbäck, 2008). At one end are democratic systems where politicians seek to affect news coverage but journalists do not support particular parties even if they respect politicians as useful news sources. Further along the continuum are authoritarian media systems where politicians directly control media institutions and political and ideological considerations limit the freedom of newsmakers (Lu, Chu, & Shen, 2016). In China, online activism has forced the state to reform its traditional ways of handling media events and politics (Song & Chang, 2016). The bi-directional nature of Internet-enabled communication has enabled new forms of interaction between the state and non-state actors and a more elastic public opinion space than the traditional media can provide (Lu et al., 2016; Song, Dai, & Wang, 2016). This raises intriguing questions about the extent to which the established, institutionalized media can continue to 'normalize' the new media formats to re-articulate the professional logic of control in relation to the emerging participatory logic. Since Chinese citizens have no electoral channels to express their views, and certainly no way to take action against policies they oppose, opinion polls become a surrogate for the public will when the Chinese media report their results both online and offline.

One purpose of this study was to extend scholarly inquiry into the mediatization of politics to the context of China. But more importantly the study was designed to develop a coherent conceptual framework for investigating how political logic and media logic interact in complementary ways contingent upon particular configurations. It challenged the assumption that media logic and political logic are involved in a zero-sum equation whereby less of one necessarily means more of the other. Using China as a test site, it explored whether online and offline news media share a single media logic. Online news sites in China incorporate participatory features in ways different from those common in the U.S. and Europe, and understanding the differences may help advance our understanding of mediatization in ways that can be generalized across systems.

Authoritarian populism as a political logic

Prior literature classifies the political logic as policy-oriented production, politics-oriented self-presentation, or polity-oriented institution (Esser, 2013). This taxonomy has been developed to distinguish that political logic from the logic applicable in other social

spheres and to provide guidelines for journalists seeking to communicate the essential features of political reality comprehensively and authentically (Meyer & Hinchman, 2002). Politicians and their parties often seek office or policy objectives by using poll reporting instrumentally (Müller & Strom, 1999). The results from opinion surveys provide a link to what the general population thinks, especially on issues that have popular appeal (Lipari, 1999).

An assessment of political logic must take into account the rules regulating the political process in the polity being considered (the party system and the political culture, for example) (Esser, 2013). Although authoritarian leaders are not constrained by an electoral mechanism, they must nevertheless worry about their legitimacy, and especially about social instability and the threat of revolt. Chang's (1999) analysis of major newspapers in authoritarian Singapore over a three-year span points towards a pattern of manufactured consent and forced consensus in their poll reporting. An important element of an authoritarian government's bid for ideologically based legitimacy is an insistence that consensus should form within the framework of the prevailing political hierarchy.

In China, democratic institutions remain underdeveloped, but the trappings of democracy, including the term 'public opinion', have begun to be used widely in the Chinese press. Control of the media has always been an important mechanism of Communist Party (CCP) rule in China, enabling the party to present its favored version of events under the pretense of 'public opinion guidance' to the exclusion of narratives that might undermine its positions or actions (Song & Chang, 2012). Politicians in contemporary China have to some extent learned to make use of public opinion to push forward their policy agendas and ambitions. In fact, efforts to make government appear more responsive to public demands without threatening the CCP's authority signal the populist turn of recent Chinese administrations (Goldman, 2006).

Populism is a generalized claim of representativeness based on persistent references to an imagined community of 'the people' (Walton, 1999). To describe 'the will of the people', McGee (1975) observes, a poll or survey is often used, and such terms as 'majority' or 'plurality' are introduced into public argument as linguistic means of legitimizing the leadership's fantasies about consensus support. In Burke, Simons, and Melia's (1989) words, 'the symbol of the people … has a tactical advantage of pointing more definitely in the direction of unity' (p. 270). As a unit, 'the people' is vague and ambiguous by design, but the term may function as a symbolic device to culturally suggest an 'us and them' divide (Laclau, 2007). In Europe, for example, it is often used in nationalist arguments against immigration or for restricting welfare support of certain groups (Mautner, 2008). 'The people' as a category is also a socioeconomic concept that is often associated with anti-elitism. Populists often employ rhetoric antagonistic toward the elite and portraying it as an opposing group taking advantage of the majority (Jansen, 2011). The elite is referred to as the opposite of common folks, while 'the people' are affirmed as sovereign, a concept often linked to political mobilization (Reisigl, 2008).

When adapting populism to specific circumstances, the content of populist rhetoric must vary according to the historical context, social structures and cultural ideologies (Jansen, 2011). For example, before the CCP came to power in China its populist rhetoric emphasized class struggle against the elite – more specifically, by the rural peasants against their landlords (Nadiri, 2007). Nowadays, it is 'the fundamental interests of the

overwhelming majority of Chinese people' that is emphasized, and China's rapid and sustained economic growth is advanced as proof of the benefits considering groups like professionals, intellectuals, and even capitalists as elements of 'the people' (Dickson, 2005). The dominant ideology of Chinese society has gradually changed from political struggle to economic gain. From time to time, however, the CCP has had to face marginalized but vocal and destructive demonstrators who are against changing the rhetoric from its Marxist roots, even in response to a changing reality (Goldman, 2006). While moving toward economic and social liberalism, China's authoritarianism remained resilient (Lu et al., 2016). This has implications for the ways in which Chinese citizens might be able to engage with civil society.

Participatory journalism as a media logic

News coverage of politics is today increasingly determined by the media themselves and their criteria, resulting in personalized and negative content being highlighted (Takens, van Atteveldt, van Hoof, & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013). Empirical evidence has shown that the media logic in a given polity is determined by the professional production procedures in its newsrooms, by the potential and limitations of the technology available, and by the economic structure of the media organizations involved (Esser, 2013). The professional, commercial and technological dimensions of the prevailing media logic set the rules and norms governing the reporting practices of different types of media (Mazzoleni, 2008). Those practices and the underlying logic to some extent become manifest in the content.

In professional terms, poll results are often valued as a direct source of information about public opinion which illuminates citizens' attitudes and behavior (Strömbäck, 2012). In assessing how poll results are being communicated to the public, researchers try to examine the degree to which relevant methodological information is disclosed (e.g. Weaver & Kim, 2002). Although the news media in authoritarian countries are usually under strict government control, their poll reporting can still inform the public as in more democratic countries (Chang, 1999). In fact it is debatable whether journalistic professionalism as it is commonly understood exists in China's authoritarian context, but the increasing prevalence of poll reporting has been interpreted as representing Chinese journalists' pursuit of professionalism (Jiang, 1997). Amid the push for professionalism, Chinese journalists have developed a keen interest in 'precision journalism' (Meyer, 1973) that appears to add some sort of professional status and credibility to the trade (Jiang, 1997). The emphasis is on using social science research techniques to quantify opinions and include more precise description in the news.

The commercial dimension of media logic has also been well documented in previous studies of poll reporting in Western democracies (e.g. Strömbäck, 2012). Market-driven forms of journalism are by no means unique to democratic polities. Guo's (2016) case study of China's leading news and entertainment web portal elucidates the attention economy's deeper implications for such an authoritarian regime which heavily censors the web. Although CCP controls remain in place, Chinese online media have tried more wide-ranging and adventurous journalistic practices to enlarge their audiences. One technique has been to incorporate citizens' views as news. There was only very limited coverage of

poll results until the marketization of the mass media in the 1990s (Jiang, 1997). Given the growing audience interest in opinion polls, some media organizations have established in-house surveying teams to support their news-making. Independent polling agencies did not emerge in China until the late 1980s (Li, 2010). After decades of rapid development, as of 2004 there were 33,447 polling enterprises and institutions (Li, 2010), a number which has presumably grown further since then. But in the business of surveying and polling, news organizations have today become one of the dominant agencies (Li, 2015). This fact in and of itself has theoretical implications for public opinion reporting in China because of the hierarchical structure that keeps the media under intrusive state guidance. In that context, reporting poll results is apparently an invaluable tool for those in power, not because of what opinion surveys might actually reveal, but because they are ever conducted in the first place.

The technological dimension of media logic is concerned with how medium-specific technology shapes the content of news reported. There is a scholarly consensus that newsroom convergence and interactivity create greater opportunities for bottom-up audience participation (Domingo et al., 2008). Participatory journalism is often characterized as having a potential to re-vitalize democracy by giving a voice to the grassroots (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). However, that vision of 'digital democracy' has been pitted against the 'normalization' thesis which contends that journalists maintain their conventional routines rather than allowing technology to change the way they produce the news (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). Studies of newspapers' web platforms suggest that media organizations have perpetuated the traditional journalistic culture largely unaltered, even while investigating opportunities for readership participation. This normalization of new media formats can be viewed as an extended form of gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In this rendering, audience contributions are integrated within the news production flow news audience.

Running opinion polls on websites is one inexpensive way of involving people in the news. Readers select among predefined responses to specific questions, a sort of participation which apparently also adds an entertainment dimension to stories preselected by the site's owner (Kent, Harrison, & Taylor, 2006). Each online poll may yield thousands of responses, but the results will not have much validity because the respondents are self-selected and any demographic information they provide is very difficult to verify (Asher, 2012). So online polls are not really about making the readers 'think'; they are more about giving them a context or a frame of reference that guides what they should think about (Kent et al., 2006).

These theoretical considerations and the interplay between the state and the media prevailing in China today suggest the following research questions.

RQ1 How does authoritarian populism manifest itself as the political logic in the Chinese news media's use of opinion polls?

RQ2 What professional, commercial and technological logic do the Chinese news media apply in their reporting of opinion poll results?

RQ3 To what extent do online and offline platforms differ in their use of audience input and in the positioning of public opinion in poll reporting? Under what configurations do multiple dimensions of political and media logics interact complementarily?

Methods

This study covered all of the polling stories published in the *People's Daily* (PD) and on the PDO website between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2012. The PD was selected because it is China's most influential and authoritative newspaper, with a long history of poll reporting (Chen, 1989). As the official mouthpiece of the CCP, the PD is considered to set the tone and represent official attitudes (Song & Chang, 2012). The PDO website, launched by the PD in 1997, is one of the most influential news portals in China. During an inspection tour of the PDO facilities in 2008, President Hu Jintao asserted that the site played a leading role in supporting the party's beliefs, guiding public opinion and thus serving netizens (Wu & Sun, 2008). Amid the tide of digitalization, the site has made continuous efforts to strengthen its interaction with netizens. An example is the 'People Survey' column launched in 1999, which conducts web surveys on topical issues and reports the results as news.

Twenty-nine search terms[1] were used to retrieve all of the news stories containing references to public opinion polls and surveys on domestic issues published in the PD. Articles that only mentioned a poll as a secondary matter were discarded. Also excluded were editorials, letters and advertisements. Next, all the polling stories published in the PDO's 'People Survey' column were retrieved. Given that this column only provides access to the relevant news items published from May 2007 to November 2013, the time period of this study was set from 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2012, covering the full range of yearly coverage to avoid any seasonal bias which might appear through considering partial years. This yielded a total of 146 articles from the PD and 573 from the PDO.

Previous studies of poll reporting in a variety of contexts – ranging from Sweden and Taiwan to Hong Kong and Singapore – drew measures from the Code of Professional Ethics and Practice of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) to evaluate the presentation of methodological information and assess how well poll results were communicated to the public (e.g. Kim & Weaver, 2001; Willnat, Lo, & Aw, 2012). That code doesn't easily fit the Chinese context, but for comparison purposes, this study also used the variables 'focus of poll', 'question wording', 'identity of the conductor', 'definition of population', 'sample size', 'sampling method', 'polling method', 'interview dates', 'sampling error', and 'response rate' in its coding. In addition, the tone of the coverage was also coded along with the presence or absence of any source attribution. Scott's π ranged from 0.78 to 1.

The quantitative content analysis was conducted to reveal the general pattern of reporting on 'public opinion', but the discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) was also applied to examine the discursive strategies used to represent that opinion. A discursive strategy in this context would be a set of practices intended to achieve a particular political goal. Special attention was paid to any evidence of nomination strategies aimed at creating in-groups or out-groups, predicational strategies aimed at identifying social actors positively or negatively, and argumentation strategies used to justify evaluative attributions and categorizations. Specifically, the coding was based on three questions: (a) How are 'the people' and 'anti-popular elites' being referred to?; (b) What positive or negative traits are attributed to each group?; and (c) What arguments are used to justify the classifications? The analysis focused on the presence or absence of populist argumentation in the reporting of poll

results, and on any similarity or differences in the ways populist arguments were articulated in the PD and the PDO.

Results

Content analysis

There was a rapid increase in the number of polling stories published on PDO during the period studied, from merely 37 in 2008 to 195 in 2012. The number of polls covered by the PD fluctuated over the range from 18 (in 2008 and 2012) to 39 (in 2010). Table 1 shows that the topic most frequently covered in the PD was politics (26.7%), followed by economics (23.3%), culture (11.6%), social values (11%), health (6.2%), and the environment (2.7%). The most frequently covered subjects on the PDO website were politics (27.4%), life quality (15.7%), education (9.1%), social security (9.1%), and transportation (6.6%). The articles reporting on political polls mostly focused on government performance. The PD published more of those than the PDO. In previous studies of poll reporting in democracies, politics was found to be the topic most frequently covered in the U.S. (41%) and in Taiwan (65%) (Kim & Weaver, 2001; Willnat et al., 2012). In authoritarian Singapore, however, Chang (1999) found that there was no such evaluation of government performance and policy. In terms of non-political poll reporting, the PDO manifested a preference for life quality and education topics, while the PD favored polls about economics and culture.

Table 2 shows the tone of the stories reporting poll results. In general, the PD reported more positively. Specifically, the PD's attitude in interpreting policy-related polls was always either positive (50%) or at least neutral (50%). The PD's reporting of opinions on government performance was also largely positive (64.3%), while its attitude towards individual official performance was largely neutral (85.7%). Similarly, the PD was more likely to adopt a positive tone in reporting on a variety of issues, except opinions about economics (44.1%), where it was more likely to report poll results negatively. In

Table 1. Focus of polls in the PD and on the PDO website, 2008–2012.

	PD	PDO
Political issues	26.7%	27.4%
Political policy	2.7%	8.7%
Government performance	19.2%	11.5%
Officials' performance	4.8%	6.1%
Other political issues	0.0%	1.0%
Non-political issues	73.3%	72.6%
Social values	11.0%	8.7%
Economics	23.3%	5.8%
Education	6.8%	9.1%
Social security	4.8%	9.1%
Transportation	0.0%	6.6%
Culture	11.6%	8.2%
Health	6.2%	5.8%
Environment	2.7%	1.0%
Life quality	6.2%	15.7%
Other issues	0.7%	2.6%
Total	146	573

Notes: $X^2 = 78.216$, $p < .05$.

Table 2. The PD and PDO's tone in reporting on different issues, 2008–2012.

		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Political policy	PD	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	4
	PDO	44.0%	24.0%	32.0%	50
Government performance*	PD	64.3%	25.0%	10.7%	28
	PDO	34.8%	18.2%	47.0%	66
Officials' performance*	PD	14.3%	85.7%	0.0%	7
	PDO	17.1%	34.3%	48.6%	35
Other political issues	PD				0
	PDO	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	6
Social value*	PD	31.3%	62.5%	6.3%	16
	PDO	24.0%	36.0%	40.0%	50
Economics	PD	35.3%	20.6%	44.1%	34
	PDO	15.2%	33.3%	51.5%	33
Education*	PD	0.0%	90.0%	10.0%	10
	PDO	28.8%	32.7%	38.5%	52
Social security	PD	0.0%	57.1%	42.9%	7
	PDO	30.8%	30.8%	38.5%	52
Transportation	PD				0
	PDO	26.3%	42.1%	31.6%	38
Culture*	PD	47.1%	35.3%	17.6%	17
	PDO	17.0%	31.9%	51.1%	47
Health*	PD	44.4%	44.4%	11.1%	9
	PDO	9.1%	33.3%	57.6%	33
Environment	PD	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	4
	PDO	16.7%	33.3%	50.0%	6
Life quality	PD	33.3%	55.6%	11.1%	9
	PDO	20.0%	37.8%	42.2%	90
Other issues	PD	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	1
	PDO	20.0%	26.7%	53.3%	15
Total*	PD	37.7%	42.5%	19.9%	146
	PDO	24.8%	31.9%	43.3%	573

Notes: Variables marked with * exhibit statistically significant relationships ($p < .05$) with the 'tone' variable in chi-square tests.

general, the PDO's coverage was more likely to adopt a negative tone in its interpretation of poll results on a variety of issues, including government performance (47%), the performance of individual officials (48.6%), economics (51.5%), social values (40%), the environment (50%), health (57.6%), and life quality (42.2%). The public's 'objections' and 'worries' appeared in their headlines quite frequently. The only topic where the PDO was more likely to adopt a positive tone was political policy (44%), though there was also a notable proportion of negative interpretations (32.0%).

Overall, 93.2% of the poll stories in the PD identified who conducted the survey (Table 3). The polls were most often conducted by media organizations (37.7%) or government agencies (34.2%). Research institutes (9.6%), educational institutes (4.8%), interest groups (4.8%), commercial polling agencies (4.1%), and community organizations (3.4%) were much less common sources. Table 3 also shows that the PD tended to adopt a positive tone in reporting the results of polls conducted by the government (54%), while polls conducted by the media were often reported dispassionately and objectively (74.5%).

Table 4 presents the percentage of poll stories that included significant methodological information. The PD most often reported who conducted the poll (93.2%), the interview dates (75.3%), and the identity of the population surveyed (68.5%). By contrast, the percentage of stories that included information on the sample size (50.7%), the sampling method (42.5%), the polling method (37.7%), or the wording of the questions (30.8%)

Table 3. Conductors of polls reported in the PD with different tones, 2008–2012.

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total number	Percentage
Government*	54.0%	14.0%	32.0%	50	34.2
Media*	12.7%	74.5%	12.7%	55	37.7
Educational institution	57.1%	42.9%	0.0%	7	4.8
Research institute	50.0%	21.4%	28.6%	14	9.6
Commercial polling agency	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%	6	4.1
Community organization	20.0%	60.0%	20.0%	5	3.4
Interest group	42.9%	42.9%	14.3%	7	4.8
Others	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	2	1.4
Not clear	50.0%	30.0%	20.0%	10	6.8
Total	37.7%	42.5%	19.9%	146	

Notes: Variables marked with * exhibit statistically significant relationships ($p < .05$) with the 'tone' variable in chi-square tests.

was much lower. The response rate (6.8%) and sampling error (0%) were hardly ever mentioned. Overall, only 11% of the polls published in the PD were based on random sampling methods. The rest relied on non-random sampling or the method was not identified. Similarly, only about 20% of the polling stories provided all or some of the survey questions. In the rest the article paraphrased the wording or did not mention the survey questions at all. As is shown in Table 5, only about four in ten of the poll stories reported the polling methodology. Thus a significant proportion of stories did not provide sufficient technical detail for readers to evaluate the survey results. In stories that identified the polling method, online surveys dominated between 2008 and 2012. Other methods such as telephone surveys (3.4%), personal interviews (2.1%), and street intercepts (0.7%) were used only occasionally. Overall, these trends in polling method did not change much between 2008 and 2012.

The PDO often provided more detailed methodological information. Since all of the polls published in People Survey were conducted by PDO itself, most of the articles contained graphs or tables which presented the original survey questions. The number of

Table 4. Methodological information provided in the PD and PDO, 2008–2012.

	PD	PDO	Total
Conductor provided*	93.2%	100.0%	98.6%
Polling method provided*	37.7%	100.0%	87.3%
Sampling error provided	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Response rate provided*	6.8%	0.0%	1.4%
Definition of population provided*	68.5%	0.0%	13.9%
Interview dates provided*	75.3%	100.0%	95.0%
Sample size provided*	50.7%	100.0%	90.0%
<100	1.4%	0.2%	0.4%
100–999	8.2%	3.1%	4.2%
1000–9999	22.6%	82.2%	70.1%
>10,000	18.5%	14.5%	15.3%
Question wording provided*	30.8%	100.0%	86.0%
For all questions	4.1%	99.0%	79.7%
For some questions	15.8%	1.0%	4.0%
Paraphrased questions	11.0%	0.0%	2.2%
Sampling method provided*	42.5%	100.0%	88.3%
Random	11.0%	0.0%	2.2%
Non-random	31.5%	100.0%	86.1%
Total	146	573	719

Notes: Variables marked with * exhibit statistically significant relationships ($p < .05$) with the 'type of media' variable in chi-square tests.

Table 5. Survey method of polls reported in the PD, 2008–2012.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
Telephone survey	0.0%	3.0%	5.1%	5.3%	0.0%	3.4%
Street intercept	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%
Mail survey	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Online survey	33.3%	27.3%	28.2%	47.4%	11.1%	31.5%
Text survey	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Personal interview	0.0%	6.1%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%
Others	0.0%	9.1%	2.6%	5.3%	0.0%	4.1%
Not clear*	66.7%	66.7%	66.7%	39.5%	88.9%	62.3%
Total	18	33	39	38	18	146

Notes: Variable marked with * exhibits statistically significant relationship ($p < .05$) with the 'year' variable in chi-square tests.

respondents selecting each response option was usually presented in graphical form. Some articles even provided a link to the original web survey. All the news stories published on the PDO website identified who conducted the poll (itself), the polling method, the interview dates, the sample size, the wording of the questions, and the sampling method. In fact, all were non-random, online surveys, so no information about population identity, response rate, or sampling error was ever mentioned. The validity of such polls should be called into question.

The selection of news sources is an essential form of gatekeeping. The difference in the two platforms' use of news sources is remarkable. Table 6 shows that 45.5% of the poll stories in the PDO included at least one news source, while the PD had a smaller proportion (36.3%). Government officials and representatives did not often appear explicitly as sources for the PDO (4.4%). Experts (3.8%) were quoted even less frequently. Instead, citizens (39.1%) constituted the most important type of source in the PDO's poll coverage. In comparison, the most often-used source in the PD's poll stories was government officials (17.1%), followed by experts (15.1%) and ordinary citizens (14.4%).

Critical discourse analysis

Nomination

Various terms were used in both PD and PDO with references to 'the public': *min* (the public), *renmin* (the people), *renmin qunzhong* (mass public), *baixing* (common people), *quanmin* (the whole people), *jumin* (residents), *qunzhong* (general public), *guomin* (nationals), *gongmin* (citizens), *shimin* (city residents), *gongzhong* (the public), *dazhong* (the masses), *minzhong* (the public), and *wangmin* (netizens). It is noteworthy that both online and offline platforms attached importance to the role and opinions of

Table 6. Use of news sources in the PD and PDO, 2008–2012.

	PD	PDO	Total
No interview*	63.7%	54.5%	56.3%
Government official*	17.1%	4.4%	7.0%
Expert*	15.1%	3.8%	6.1%
Citizen*	14.4%	39.1%	34.1%
Other	2.7%	1.0%	1.4%
Total	146	573	719

Notes: Variables marked with * exhibit statistically significant relationships ($p < .05$) with the 'type of media' variable in chi-square tests.

netizens in referring to the 'public', which was especially the case for the PDO. Over one third of the news stories in the sample from the PDO used direct quotes from netizen comments after publishing the cumulative answers, thereby bringing context to the topic. The aggregated agenda of the audience were complemented by an extensive collection of quotations of specific individuals about specific topics. And the sources were usually cited in a format which included a specific user IP address or user name.

In contrast with 'the people', the PD and PDO presented four more specific types of individuals or groups as 'anti-popular elites' – incompetent or corrupt government personnel, large private businesses, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and the rich. In the PD, government departments or officials so categorized were usually below the municipal level. Many of the private businesses stigmatized were in industries directly affecting people's livelihood, such as food and land. The group included both domestic firms and joint ventures. The SOEs were largely involved in monopolized industries, and the rich ranged from CEOs of SOEs to the stakeholders in financial institutions. In comparison, the PDO showed more latitude in its explicitly negative presentations of social categories. It more often identified government departments and officials by name (e.g. the mayor of Sui county; the tourism bureau chief in Lanzhou). The PDO also more frequently named specific industries and companies, ranging from SOEs (e.g. China Mobile) to large multinational corporations (e.g. KFC). Instead of referring to rich men as a general social category, the PDO individualized it by listing specific rich persons such as coal industry bosses, the second generation of wealthy or powerful families, and celebrities.

Predication

'The people as political sovereign' was a notable predication of populist logic used by both media. It suggests that the Chinese people have a say in policy-making and policy implementation. For example, the people were described as 'supervisors of government officials'; 'active participants in politics', 'advisors in governmental and public affairs', 'the judges of government performance', 'managers of the state', 'the owners of public property', and 'the foundation of the CCP'. Both the PD and the PDO stressed the people's freedom to choose, their right to know, their right to report an offense to the authorities, and even their 'rights to speak up for urban planning, construction and management'. 'The people' was invoked as a general category in ways giving the appearance of agency and bestowing (entirely mythical) empowerment (Burke et al., 1989). The articles also elaborated on the people's hopes and expectations: the people care about public affairs, they expect good policies to improve their life quality, and they hope to build a 'harmonious society' to secure their personal property. Despite these predicates that suggest an active voice and role for the public, 'the people' were also allocated a passive role from time to time. For example, they were portrayed as the passive beneficiaries of social welfare, reform programs and technological development. The government was portrayed as continuously making efforts to protect the wealth, health and safety of the people, with the masses deriving the benefits.

'The people as a class' was another visible predication of populist logic. While the people were depicted as supporters of the rule of law and supporters of people affected by disasters, the PD and PDO also depicted anti-popular social categories whose misbehavior was depicted as injuring the people's interests. In general, both the PD and PDO drew a negative picture of corrupt government departments and officials, the greedy,

profit-seeking big businesses, the unscrupulous rich, unethical hospitals and doctors, and criminals. The officials thus criticized were depicted as abusing their political power and seeking private gain rather than promoting the public interest. Their political behavior 'ignored people's livelihood' and 'betrayed the CCP's expectations'. The industries and enterprises (e.g. multinational corporations, property developers, and state-owned airlines) cheated and overcharged their consumers. The rich men had high incomes but little social responsibility, such as the second generation of the rich who 'deliberately broke the law'. The hospitals and doctors devoted their energy less to healing the sick than to making money. Compared with the PD, the PDO gave more exposure to people's 'unsatisfactory' situations in daily life. For example, people's grievances about their heavy burdens in life were reported. Unjust treatment by officials or government departments was another common theme, as was harsh treatment by irresponsible businesses or public institutions.

Argumentation

The analysis identified a variety of argumentation schemes with reference to lists of topos from previous scholarly work (e.g. Reisigl, 2006, 2008), reflecting different features of populism and the rhetorical principles on which populism depends. 'The people' as a topos applied uses various conditional or causal paraphrases – if the people favor a specific political decision, that decision should be made and if the people favor a political action, then the political authority should be exercised to provide for its enforcement. That topos was also sometimes elaborated negatively – if the people oppose a specific political action or decision, the government should not compel or induce compliance. In many different forms, the topos involved what people like or dislike, what worries them, what specific problems or difficulties they have to deal with, and what treatment they deserve from their political leaders. In other words, 'the people' were being represented, even if they did not speak directly. For example, through some interviews with officials, the PD presented the government's resolve to remedy situations about which the people were complaining. In a news item stemming from a survey of public satisfaction, the PD did not give details of specific policies or government actions with which the people were satisfied or dissatisfied, it simply claimed that the government 'would strive to resolve the problems raised by our people'. The PDO went further to list commendations, complaints and expectations the public had raised and called on the government to 'listen' and 'respond'. The government, especially at the local level, was called on to address the public's concerns and to act on the public's feedback. Among a large number of direct quotes from netizen comments that often contained explicit expressions of emotion, there were netizens' criticisms of the state-owned broadband service provider as well as netizens' vocal support for smoking bans in public spaces.

In addition to 'the people' topos, there was other content-related populist argumentation in play. But many were subtypes of 'the people' topos, making clear references to 'the people', 'the public', 'the masses', and so on. The 'democratic participation' topos has shown itself in several different forms. For example, decision-making rights and power should be given back to the people and not reserved for officials or an elite minority. The PD frequently requested government departments to incorporate public opinion into their decision-making about a variety of issues ranging from punishing citizens' uncivilized behavior, to urban planning, to the rule of law. The PDO also appealed for

greater transparency and public participation in both policy-making and implementation. Notable was a direct quote from one netizen who requested the disclosure of government income and expenditure on the grounds that the public's supervision is necessary to combat corruption. In these examples there was an underlying argumentation scheme that can abstractly be elaborated as: in contrast to bureaucratic decision-making, all who are affected by a policy should have enough say in the making of that decision.

The populist topos of discontent and anger can be explained as: If the plain folks express their frustrations or discontent with a political policy or action, the sources of public discontent must be addressed and their demands should be satisfied. The PD drew on complaints from netizens to address public dissatisfaction with fraud in official recruitment, anti-corruption mechanisms, and the regulation of the property market. Nevertheless, the emphasis in the coverage was often not on the problems, but rather on the government's determination to solve these problems or on the measures it had taken. For example, when addressing the rising criticisms about continued price growth in China's property market, the PD seldom delved too deep into the root cause, but often ended on a positive note: the government department concerned 'has begun to seek public advice'. In contrast, the PDO placed less emphasis on the government's responses. Highly emotional netizen comments were frequently quoted when the PDO appealed to the government for the punishment of fraudulent food industry operators and officials abusing political power.

The topos of burdening can be summarized as: If the plain folks are burdened by specific problems, someone should act to ease those burdens. Among many others, medical burdens were the most frequently mentioned. China's recent medical reform has enriched hospitals and companies but not done a lot to improve the nation's health-care system. The public continues to complain about the cost of medical care (Wang, 2015). The PD called for justice and medical system reforms to guarantee that everyone 'can afford medical services'. The PDO asked to 'release the common people from the burden of drug bill' and to keep a lid on medical malpractice while keeping public concerns as the top priority.

'Reaching to the needs of all the people' appeared frequently in both the PD and the PDO. Related to this is the topos of justice which declares fair play and equal access to rights. This conclusion rule differs from the Western perception of justice in a democratic system that is primarily concerned with equal liberty and electoral parity. It favors the government taking a major role in ensuring distributive justice. The fair allocation of resources both in terms of opportunities and outcomes should be secured to engender stronger public trust in the government. For example, the PD echoed the netizens' expectations of equal and adequate income and education, and thus called on the government to take into consideration the needs of disadvantaged groups. Likewise, the PDO asked to diminish the gap in public health care between urban and rural residents, which is another manifestation of the topos of justice.

Conclusions

This study has sought to extend scholarly understanding of the mediatization of politics beyond Western contexts by analyzing the media logic and the political logic underlying the selection and interpretation of polling news in China. The formal features of poll

reporting in the PD and its web counterpart the PDO website were compared. We then proceeded to examine the outlets' interpretations of poll results, with a view to revealing the media logic the coverage implies in tandem with the political logic that shapes poll reporting in China. The study concentrated on content indicators because it was explicitly investigating whether the print and web formats share a single media logic and how it interacts with the political logic. The dual logics were found to interact in a complex fashion and to complement each other to some extent.

The analysis showed that only rarely was more than barely sufficient methodological information provided in reports of polling results. The public's ability to evaluate the results presented was severely constrained. And the results were usually treated as matters of fact in China, with their defects seldom discussed. The lack of technical details may not reflect poor methodology, but rather a broader combined influence of media logic and political logic, but this could not be confirmed. On the surface, it might be taken as an indication of a conscious or unconscious neglect on the part of news organizations, or perhaps deliberate harnessing of survey findings to address policy questions and social issues that are relevant to the public. From an ontological and epistemological point of view, it is not poll results per se, but the reporting of the results that matters the most in the Chinese setting. Both the PD and PDO were found to treat 'public opinion' as synonymous with poll findings, regardless of the findings' inherent validity. They used polls not so much to take a measure of public opinion as to create it; not so much to collect information as to present 'correct' attitudes for emulation and to mobilize mass acquiescence or mass anger and public discontent.

Compared with the PD, the PDO's more negative tone in interpreting poll results points towards a lower threshold for public complaints being heard, and much greater latitude for social problems to be disclosed in the online world. While government representatives were the predominant attributed sources in the PD's poll coverage, the PDO was more reliant on readers' online comments. The analysis of the two platforms' types of sources and their frequency of citation suggest that functional sourcing has been put into effect. Both the PD and PDO were engaged in 'gatewatching' (Bruns, 2005) – pointing readers to source material provided by diverse but selected actors. Nevertheless, the PDO cited many more quotes from netizens in its use of sources. Its interactive web features have indeed fed into greater pluralism in media discourse through a diversified range of news source. These are manifestations of medium-specific editorial considerations, with the online platform embracing a more participatory form of journalism by including more voices from civil society. Through its web surveys the PDO created opportunities for citizen participation and turned its own poll findings into a regular news feed.

There remain, however, limits on what can be published, even on the web. For example, the PDO still maintained a relatively positive attitude in its interpretation of any poll results related to political policies. The audience had no say in any selection, filtering, processing, editing or interpretation of the event or issue involved. The online platform has operated with a distinctly different logic from that of traditional mass media, though overlapping with it. The adoption and use of new technology in journalism can only be understood within the wider professional and social context in which the technology is to be used. While the poll reporting in Western democracies focuses mostly on the 'horse

race' of politics, poll stories in China resemble a consensus-building process that channels popular consent and participation delimited by the official version of what counts as public opinion.

The critical discourse analysis revealed the use of authoritarian populist rhetoric in both the PD and the PDO's representation of public opinion. On one level, positioning the people as the political sovereign promotes social unity rather than widening differences. On another level, both the PD and the PDO treat 'the people' in class terms, opposing them in a vertical relationship to anti-popular 'elites'. In fact, the PD used relatively moderate populist rhetoric; the PDO showed a more marked inclination to describe a certain class as 'the people' in anti-elite rhetoric while ascribing to them superior value. Both, though, were directly or indirectly supporting communist democratic centralism and CCP power. China's recent changes have certainly created groups of relative 'winners' and 'losers' whose interests are to some extent opposed. Personal judgments about what composes the 'common interest' and the perceived prices and profits of change will hardly be the same for the members of different groups. In that situation, poll reporting functions as a safety valve, allowing citizens' voices to be heard and a variety of social groups to receive attention. Citizens, after all, normally form a more vivid impression after being told what their fellow citizens believe than after hearing from the leadership what they should believe. Information about survey results – genuine, or manufactured for the purpose – may serve as a demonstration or as propaganda to regulate the behavior of individuals and groups, thus becoming a useful form of manipulation for the journalistic (and political) elite.

This study covered only poll reporting in 2008–2012. Even so, it was able to provide a thorough account of both offline and offline content in the flagship newspaper of a non-Western political and cultural context. Poll reporting has a relatively short history in China, and the results of this study show that there is a serious need to establish guidelines for such reporting and to equip journalists with better basic knowledge. Another way to improve the quality of poll reporting in China would be to support the growth of academic polling organizations. As the study's findings indicate, quite a few poll stories made extensive use of self-evaluation reports from institutions with a government background. In Western mass communication, professionalism as a social category requires that the production and dissemination of news and public opinion be detached from political and ideological concerns, but this idea is not yet accepted in China. Although it remains difficult to envisage an expansion of rigorous social science polling in a tightly controlled media environment, relatively independent pollsters with a reputation for trustworthy work may provide more reliable measurements of public thinking. If the work of such pollsters could be published it should be a boon to Chinese journalism. This is especially significant when the news media begin to pay close attention to not only what is polled, but how and why it is being polled and for whom.

Note

1. The key words were Chinese terms similar to 'poll', such as public opinion poll, online poll, Internet poll, telephone poll, mail survey, street survey, text survey, random survey, sampling survey, satisfaction survey, and so on.

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