

## The Ghosts of Newspapers Past: Public Interest Journalism as Movement

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Journalism's financial crisis has killed news organizations at an alarming rate. Most digital-born news ventures, once touted as the profession's saviors, have also been short-lived. These trends threaten the viability of public interest journalism. The crisis is especially acute in settings where a free press was not deeply entrenched to start with. One hopeful countertrend is the effort of journalists to pass on their professional values to new organizational hosts, even as the media companies that employ them die or drift away from professional principles. Our case studies in Taiwan, China, and Indonesia reveal that the normative assets of terminated or fading organizations are partially preserved or revived in new hosts. We suggest that a social movements perspective—which helpfully distinguishes between a movement and its constituent organizations—can help illuminate how professionals try to survive threats to public interest journalism during periods of abeyance. This perspective is not intended to gloss over the crisis within the news media industry, but to spotlight the drivers of the journalistic movement that require support.

*Keywords: social movement, abeyance, public interest journalism, Asia*

Journalism has been under grave threat for decades. While the profession has never been free of political, financial, and technological pressures, what is new is the alarming rate at which news media organizations have been collapsing. Talk of an “existential crisis” in the news media industry (see, e.g., McChesney & Pickard, 2011; McNair, 2013) does not seem hyperbolic, particularly amid an ongoing coronavirus pandemic that has decimated whole economies (Nielsen, 2020). What should be equally evident from the current crisis is the importance of journalism in the public interest, not just to sustain democracy but also to keep people alive. The concept of public interest journalism, although contested, is adopted here to emphasize the widely valorized civic responsibilities of the press, treating the “public” as the “god-term

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of journalism,” in James Carey’s (2007) words, with which “journalists justify their actions, defend the craft, plead their case in terms of the public’s right to know, their role as the representative of the public, and their capacity to speak both to and for the public” (p. 12). The political environment for such work has turned strikingly inhospitable during what has been called a democratic recession (Diamond, 2015), with various illiberal forces—from new authoritarian populisms to old-fashioned despotisms—intent on neutralizing journalism as an agent of social progress. Public interest journalism demands “virtuous resistance to the predatory circumstance of commercial and political power” (Harrison, 2019, p. 11).

Journalism studies have clarified the professional norms that require support. Scholars have helped distinguish between journalism’s commercial and social impulses (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004; Donsbach, 2009); critiqued prevailing notions of professionalism (Lewis, 2012; Waisbord, 2013); and identified significant differences in how journalism is perceived and practiced in different contexts (Hanitzsch, 2011; Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramasprasad, & de Beer, 2019; Mellado et al., 2017). Historical studies (Schudson, 1981; Stephens, 2007) tell us how professional norms developed over the *longue durée*, while works on paradigm repair show how the profession responds to apparent failures (Vos & Moore, 2020). Yet we know much less about whether and how journalists respond to major structural shifts that severely restrict their opportunities to do meaningful work. What happens, for example, when a country’s public interest journalism was already hanging by a thread, sustained by just a couple of relatively conscientious news organizations, and that thread is snipped by a government that takes a sharp authoritarian turn, or by ownership changes that usher in more commercial priorities? Such extreme precarity is far more common than might be apparent if one is focused only on the WEIRD world of Western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic nations. It describes the state of affairs in Xi Jinping’s China, Narendra Modi’s India, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey, and Rodrigo Duterte’s Philippines, for a start, as well as numerous other emerging democracies where markets and technology killed promising news organizations, blocking the development of an independent media tradition.

We presumed that such severe setbacks would be the end of the story. But when we talked with newsroom leaders in Asia in the course of a quite separate study (George, Zeng, & Mazumdar, 2021), we were compelled to rethink our assumptions. That project focused on the internal policies and values of exemplary news organizations. In our semistructured interviews with newsroom leaders, we were struck by how spontaneously several of our informants situated their norms and values historically. While the unit of analysis for our original study was the news organization, the spokespeople for these very organizations did not box their professional identities within corporate or institutional containers. Even as they worked for the survival and success of their current organizations, they clearly saw themselves as inheritors and trustees of a tradition that is barely publicly recorded in a hostile environment. In more than one case, the senior journalists talked at length about how they were trying to sustain the values of news organizations that were no more.

This observation recalls the scholarship on collective memory as one aspect of journalists’ efforts to build an interpretive community (Zelizer, 1993). History provides inspirational stories about the profession’s successes, such as Watergate in the United States (Schudson, 1993). At the other extreme, journalists have been found to use sobering stories about newspaper closures to engage peers and the public on the need to protect their profession (Carlson, 2012). This article goes beyond what Carlson (2016)

calls "metajournalistic discourse" (p. 353) and looks at journalists' practical strategies in the face of existential threats in three Asian societies. We take seriously the unexpected insight from our previous work: Reports about certain news organizations' deaths are sometimes exaggerated, to paraphrase Mark Twain. Some journalists seem to be not only honoring the memories of dead newspapers but also self-consciously sustaining their professional commitment to serve the public interest in a hostile environment. We suggest that studies of media systems should include due consideration of the roles of largely informal networks and groups of journalists that may be safehousing and incubating professional values that are struggling to find outlets. When journalism operates in an environment that has turned hostile like the ones addressed in this study, journalists turn to the past for sustenance.

A social movements perspective is well suited to this analytical task. The social movement paradigm regards a movement as a loose, cause-driven network comprising various formal and informal organizations and individuals (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Diani, 2011). Organizations rise and fall and drop in and out of the movement, and the state of any single organization does not fully capture the health of the movement as a whole. In environments highly inhospitable to public interest journalism, a movement perspective encourages us to distinguish the professional ethos from its organizational vehicles at any one point of time. This, in turn, could reveal how professional values and practices can outlive dead or dying news organizations.

To illustrate how this perspective might be applied, we return to three of the settings that we examined in our earlier study, namely Taiwan, China, and Indonesia. Taiwan and Indonesia are young democracies where the press is constrained more by the market than by the state. In China, the Communist Party has further tightened its grip to dominate and penetrate news media. Obviously, journalists in these three societies are unlikely to understand, let alone practice, the roles and values of public interest journalism in exactly the same way. Comparative literature has highlighted interesting international variations in professional norms (Hanitzsch et al., 2019); these differences are outside the scope of the present study. Equally, though, such research has highlighted broad commonalities: There are journalists working in diverse systems around the world who share a normative commitment to journalism in the public interest. For different reasons, journalists in Taiwan, China, and Indonesia have experienced great fluctuations, within a single generation, in the space available for public interest journalism. In all three cases, the dominant journalistic culture is not public interest journalism, which has been pushed to the margins. In this regard, they are hardly unique. We expect our analysis will be relevant to a large number of contexts. Compared with established liberal democracies, many countries have much weaker professional journalism traditions and lack strong norms and institutions supportive of independence (George, 2019; Lee, 2001). The profession is commensurately reliant on exceptional news organizations pushing for higher standards. When these decline or die, there is a lot to lose.

### **Continuity: Journalism Through the Lens of Social Movements**

Social movements are collective actions oriented toward social change, sustained through formal or informal networks, and shared purposes and identities (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Tarrow, 2011; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Their ability to challenge dominant, mainstream structures rises and falls depending on opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and framing processes (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996).

Movements are defined by their positionality, not the causes they espouse. A particular cause (trade unionism, for example) may be mainstream and even dominant in one society (run along socialist lines) but marginal and repressed in another (in a neoliberal or fascist state). Where dominant, we expect to see it institutionalized within the establishment, its activities articulated with routine administrative and political processes. Where marginal, it is usually expressed, if at all, through movements. The idea of treating journalism as a movement is not new. George (2006) argues that radical alternative media are not just supportive of social movements but are also themselves a movement. We are extending this argument, suggesting that public interest norms and practices that the profession would like to believe are mainstream are in fact marginal in many societies. In countries with strong public service broadcasters, public interest journalism is situated relatively securely within the establishment. In many more countries, though, socially responsible, democracy-enhancing journalism is more celebrated in theory than observed in practice. Treating such journalism as a movement on the margins allows us to unlock conceptual tools from the social movements' literature that could help make sense of patterns we observe in many societies' media.

In particular, we propose the concept of "abeyance" as a way to analyze journalists' strategies for surviving collective challenges exerted by external forces (political and economic). Taylor (1989) developed this concept to explain how social movements ride out hostile external environments. In her study of the first two waves of feminist movements, she argued that when opportunity structure is nonreceptive, a movement may hide in the stage of "abeyance" (Taylor, 1989, p. 762). Although it may not be publicly visible in this phase, it continues to maintain and nurture its support base, preparing for the next resurgence when the environment becomes more favorable. Abeyance structures thus promote movement continuity. They bridge peaks of movement activity through three mechanisms: promoting the survival of networks, sustaining a repertoire of goals and tactics, and promoting a collective identity (Taylor, 1989). Her approach suggests dissecting the networks, tactical repertoires, and collective identities that could enable public interest journalism to endure, movement-like.

### ***Continuity Through Informal Networks***

Social movements rely on "collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action" (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 3). Dense informal networks are particularly vital for any movement to survive to sustain collective actions (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). In abeyance, public interest journalism endures through the mobilization of resources through key agents—journalists, scholars, and activists. Schudson (2001), in his historical account of the birth and development of American journalistic norms, points out that professional associations like the American Society of Newspaper Editors and formal journalistic education help institutionalize journalistic norms as the industrial discipline. In Europe, strong trade unions and press councils help protect journalistic autonomy. Yet more often it is informal fluid networks such as neighborhood, kinship, and friendship that play increasingly vital roles in mobilizing collective actions (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). The Internet age has exponentially boosted the possibilities of networking beyond organizations (Castells, 2012), nurturing what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call the connective logic of social movement mobilized via notably more individualized, digitally-mediated informal networks. For public interest journalism, the vital role of such informal networks is particularly salient in restrictive societies such as China where organizational support is scarce (Svensson, 2012).

### ***Continuity Through Tactical Repertoires***

Tactics are institutionalized so that actions of a challenging group at a given point in time can be passed on to a subsequent group (Tilly, 1979). For a movement to survive low tides, it must develop "a battery of specialized tactics" that becomes "a part of a group's repertoire of collective action and influence the subsequent range of actions available to future challenges" (Taylor, 1989, p. 771). Tactical repertoires are used to negotiate for the space of autonomy of journalism so that journalism can sustain itself even in an unwelcoming environment. The "Anglo-American invention" of journalistic discursive strategies such as objectivity (Chalaby, 1996, p. 303), for example, is a "strategic ritual" (Tuchman, 1972, p. 606) to protect professional autonomy. Ethics and norms help provide solidarity of the community (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). In a repressive political environment, journalists employ "guerrilla tactics" to sustain journalistic practice under strict state censorship in China and Taiwan (Tong, 2007, p. 530; also see Hassid, 2016; Lee, 2003), or "militant journalism" in Latin America (Waisbord, 2013, p. 2). The array of tactics that a movement develops to sustain itself inspires the goals and tactics adopted in resurgence (Taylor, 1989). As Tong and Sparks (2009) observe in China, journalists have been forced to develop tactics to "navigate the minefields of economic and political obstacles" to sustain a space to keep journalism alive, even if it cannot thrive (p. 345).

### ***Continuity Through Collective Identity***

Social movements draw on the larger cultural stock for constructing and interpreting a collective identity and purpose (Gongaware, 2010; Zald, 1996). They are thus able to articulate the position of the movement within a field of actors and the role of the movement on the stage of contention (Gongaware, 2010; Hunt, Benford, & Snow, 1994). Networks are connected, albeit loosely, by their common goals and shared values. As Melucci (1996) notes, the purpose of building collective identity is "to produce new definitions by integrating the past and the emerging elements of the present into the unity and continuity of a collective actor" (p. 75). In an abeyance phase of a social movement, participants conduct activities to build a structure through which the social movement can maintain its collective identity in preparation for future mobilizations (Taylor, 1989).

Journalists construct a "professional allegiance" (Schudson, 2001, p. 159) to an interpretive community built on shared interpretations of key public events and their identity (Zelizer, 1993). Deep in what George (2013) calls the "democratic core" of journalistic collective identity is a shared professional ethos of public service, which is "the most important reason for the existence of journalism" (p. 39). It functions to self-legitimize journalists' positions and practices (Deuze, 2005; Zelizer, 2004). Journalists who subscribe to the public interest as a core value can be found in various national contexts (Hafez, 2002; Hanitzsch et al., 2011), including in new democracies or nondemocracies (Donsbach, 2009). Our case studies are situated in such contexts.

### **Case Studies**

We test the above analytical framework on the Asian cases that originally sparked our interest in how journalists sustain their professional ethos beyond the grave of organizational vehicles. A case study

approach is suitable for such an explorative study, providing opportunities to understand cases holistically and in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Frey et al., 1992). We do not wish to propose any general, universal formula for sustaining public interest journalism in a hostile environment. Our aim is simply to nudge the field toward an analytical framework for understanding the sustainability of public interest journalism in times of crisis.

Of the 12 news organizations widely known for their strong journalistic ethos in our original study, five—two in Taiwan, two in China, and one in Indonesia—gave us unexpectedly archaeological articulations of their norms and values. When we asked them open-ended questions about what kept them going despite the political and economic pressures to which most of their industry had succumbed, they spontaneously referred to inspirations from the past and how they were consciously trying to keep alive certain practices and mindsets from their historical exemplars. Although unexpected, the historical turn in the conversations was striking enough for us to follow up there and then with questions seeking elaboration. In these five organizations, our key informants comprised 10 senior executives, ranging from veteran section editors to editors-in-chief and publishers (Table 1). All were face-to-face interviews in their offices, of about an hour each, conducted between 2016 and 2018. The Indonesian interview was in English, while the others were in a mix of Chinese and English. We supplemented the interviews with questions by e-mail as well as interviews with academics specializing in journalism studies in each society, secondary literature, and primary documents. We expect these case studies to provide in-depth insights based on firsthand interviews with newsroom leaders in three Asian societies.

**Table 1. List of News Organizations Interviewees.**

News Organizations	Interviewees
<i>Beijing News</i> (China)	Dai Zigeng, Publisher Zhu Xuedong, Deputy Chief Editor
<i>The Paper</i> (China)	Liu Yonggang, Chief Editor Sun Jian, Deputy Chief Editor Zhang Jun, Deputy Chief Editor
<i>Business Weekly</i> (Taiwan)	Zhang Yi-Jun, Deputy Chief Editor Liu Pei-Xiu, Deputy Chief Editor Tian Xi-Ru, Chief Correspondent
<i>The Reporter</i> (Taiwan)	Sherry Lee, Editorial Managing Editor
<i>Tempo</i> (Indonesia)	Arif Zulkifli, CEO

### **Taiwan: Sustaining Media Independence**

Taiwan today has one of the freest and most vibrant media environments in Asia but suffers the effects of untrammled commercialization and an increasingly polarized polity. The territory's mainstream journalism is criticized for its tabloidization and partisanship (Weston, 2013). One news organization that bucks the trend is *The Reporter*, a nonprofit online media venture dedicated to independent and quality in-depth reporting. It won three awards from SOPA (the Society of Publishers in Asia) in its first year. Another noteworthy exception is *Business Weekly*, which continues to uphold a stringent church-state separation

between editorial and marketing. It even has a policy of refusing advertising from companies that it is likely to report on, to avoid even the appearance of bias (George, Zeng, & Mazumdar, 2021).

*The Reporter* was founded by veteran journalist Ho Jung-Shin in 2015. While its nonprofit approach is modeled on America's *ProPublica*, its ethos traces its lineage to Taiwan's past. Sherry Lee, *The Reporter's* editorial managing editor, cites progressive independent newspapers of the 1980s, when Taiwan was emerging from almost 40 years of martial law. During this democratization period, there was strong public pressure for professional and responsible news media that would support the democratic movement. One example was *The World (Renjian)*, a quality left-wing magazine. Founded by Chen Ying-Zhen, a reputed intellectual imprisoned during the martial law era, *The World* specialized in independent investigative stories and critical essays focusing on social problems during the Kuomintang's repressive White Terror. The magazine lasted only four years but—together with other pro-democracy "guerrilla media" (Lee, 2003) of the same period—influenced the journalistic culture of a generation of Taiwanese journalists. Liu Pei-Xiu, deputy chief editor of *Business Weekly*, cites *The World* as formative in shaping her understanding of public interest journalism. "I learned about journalistic integrity from *The World*. And today we are still emphasizing the same values to younger journalists in our newsroom," Liu told us. The legacy of *The World* is also echoed by media academics<sup>2</sup> we interviewed in Taiwan.

Senior editors at *The Reporter* and *Business Weekly* and every academic we interviewed in Taiwan also unanimously cite the influence of another dead newspaper, the *Independence Evening Post*. Eve Chiu, CEO of Taiwan's Excellent Journalism Award and former journalist, credits the far-reaching impact of this paper for Taiwanese journalists' common pursuit of press independence. Founded in 1947, it became Taiwan's most trusted publication by the early 1990s. Upholding the editorial principle of "nonpartisan, independent operation," the newspaper played a vital role in Taiwan's press development and democratization (Lin, 1999, p. 8). When it was to be sold in 1994, its staff, joined by journalists from other newspapers, took to the streets demanding that the new management sign an agreement guaranteeing editorial independence. The protest led to the establishment of the Association of Taiwan Journalists to protect the journalists' independence and a Cannon for Editorial Practice drafted by the association.

On the surface, such efforts failed to achieve the proximate goal of protecting the editorial integrity of the *Independence Evening Post*. Under the new management, the paper lost its independent journalistic rigor and discontinued publication in 2001. But the principles championed in the campaign lived on. In particular, the Cannon of Editorial Practice provided a clear benchmark for the profession. In movement terms, it was part of the repertoire that today's journalists have inherited from the 1994 generation. While this principle is ignored by most organizations, some take it seriously. *Business Weekly*, for example, has strict in-house guidelines on conflicts of interest, including not accepting advertisements from corporations that it is likely to cover.

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<sup>2</sup> In Taiwan, we interviewed two renowned media academics: Professor Lin Ly-Yun of Taiwan National University and Eve Chiu, CEO of Taiwan's Excellent Journalism Award, who also teaches journalism at Fu Jin University of Taiwan.

Personal networks have played important roles in the preservation and transmission of journalistic cultures in Taiwan, a fact that would not be apparent from an account solely focused on the lives and deaths of news organizations. Sherry Lee describes how her journalistic ideals were shaped while working at *CommonWealth* magazine, once the most highly reputed news organization in Taiwan, where she was mentored by Diane Ying, the founder of *CommonWealth* and former journalist with *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. With the increasing commercialization of Taiwanese media in the early noughties, Lee grew discontent with the magazine's decaying newsroom culture as it caved into market imperatives, she says. "Everything has changed. . . . I was like a mouse running away." Ho, founder of *The Reporter*, started his journalism career in the early 1990s, when he participated in the *Independence Evening Post* campaign and served as the first president of the Association of Taiwan Journalists. As one of the most prominent journalists in Taiwan, Ho is connected to a large network of journalists, activists, and scholars who strongly identify with the shared values of independent public interest journalism. Professor Lin Lih-Yun also observes that many influential public figures in Taiwan's media landscape and civil society today came from the now deceased *Independence Evening Post*. Eve Chiu, reflecting on her stint at the *Independence Evening Post*, emphasizes how journalists from the paper are "different" from those from mainstream media. In studying the guerrilla media in Taiwan's democratization, Lee (2003) notes the vital role of this in-group identity as it helps "sustain a sense of camaraderie and common purpose in the face of common threats" (p. 166).

#### ***China: Life Support for the Gains From Pro-market Reforms***

As a one-party authoritarian state, China has long institutionalized what scholars call Leninist party journalism (Zeng, 2019; Zhao, 2012), resulting in one of the most strictly controlled media systems in the world. The pro-market reforms of the 1980s created a system of party-market corporatism (Lee, He, & Huang, 2007); the state has allowed a dual track of party control and commercialization, with intermittent periods of loosening up (Lee, 2000; Zhao, 2012). The period from late 1980s to early 2010s is, in hindsight, widely regarded as a golden age for Chinese journalism (Tong, 2019; Tong & Sparks, 2009). The concepts of watchdog journalism and public interest journalism emerged in professional discourse, even if journalists could never realize these to the extent possible in free societies (Pan & Chan, 2003; Pan & Lu, 2003).

In the Xi Jinping era, the state has rolled back this space, reimposing discipline on marketized media. Commercial media such as *Southern Weekly*, which earned a strong reputation for public interest journalism, have also been harmed by journalism's financial crisis, which has tilted the balance of power back toward state-funded party organs (Tong, 2019; Wang & Sparks, 2019). Nearly all quality newspapers devoted to public service journalism, most notably the Southern Media Group's *Southern Weekly* and its sister publication *Southern Metropolis Daily*, have been cleansed to make sure they toe the party line.

While China has no truly independent news organizations, one outlet that tried to maintain a professional, public service orientation is *Beijing News*, which was set up in 2003 as an entrepreneurial collaboration between the renowned Southern Media Group and the national party organ Guangming Daily Group. Dai Zigeng, then a senior journalist at *Guangming Daily* but with close connections with liberal publications, initiated the partnership and served as the publisher of this new commercial paper. *Beijing*

News prided itself in its quality public interest journalism and professionalism, infused by management nurtured at the Southern Media Group. Deputy Chief Editor Zhu Xuedong said:

We ask basic questions here: Why do we do journalism? Why do we perform the role of a watchdog? . . . We are aiming at a rule-of-law democratic society. We do journalism to get as close as we can to the truth, to promote equality and justice. In our newsroom, such convictions will be passed down from generation to generation. (Zhu, personal communication, March 28, 2017)

Shortly after our interview, *Beijing News* was cleansed and its professional orientation in effect dismantled by the authorities in 2017. Zhu left the paper, together with almost the entire senior editorial team. But he keeps an active social media presence where he maintains his networks with working and former senior editors, and regularly engages with journalists and editors discussing the craft of journalism.

Another noteworthy news organization is *The Paper*, an online-only publication of the Shanghai United Media Group, which belongs to the municipal government of the affluent megacity of Shanghai. Shortly after its 2014 launch, *The Paper* ran a series of in-depth stories on high-level official corruption, gaining itself national fame and popularity. With the media environment in China deteriorating markedly in recent years, *The Paper* carries more articles conforming with the official line. The practice of infusing critical reporting with lively propaganda pieces, however, is considered a necessary tactic to maintain space within the highly restrictive system (Repnikova & Fang, 2019).

At one level, *The Paper* exemplifies Communist Party propaganda at its most sophisticated. It is a state-sanctioned "online experiment" (Repnikova & Fang, 2019) meant to reach out to Internet-savvy, younger, and educated Chinese put off by overt propaganda mouthpieces such as *People's Daily*. Its executives are forthright about *The Paper's* place in China's narrow media spectrum. Asked if the outlet belonged in the category of more independent commercial media or party media, editor Sun Jian replied without hesitation: "Of course we are party media." But they also made it plain that this status did not completely define their professional identity. When invited to relate the inspiration behind *The Paper*, they did not immediately refer to the latest social media trends, for example. Instead, they talked about a dead newspaper, *Oriental Morning Post*.

The *Post* was a commercially oriented newspaper of the Shanghai United Media Group. It was given more autonomy than its sister newspaper *Jiefang Daily*, which serves as the local party organ. The *Post's* in-depth coverage on social issues included investigative stories exposing the notorious scandal of a state-owned dairy giant selling milk powder contaminated with melamine, which poisoned thousands of children in 2008. Qiu Bing, the publisher, even said he wanted to make it the "New York Times of China" in terms of quality reporting and broadsheet design (Luo, 2014, para. 16). But the owners pulled the plug in 2017. As part of its restructuring exercise, the Shanghai United Media Group transferred most of the *Post's* editorial team and management, including Qiu Bing, to *The Paper*. The unintended side effect of this top-down corporate decision was to preserve the professional network and collective identity of the *Post* newsroom. Qiu Bing said that even the name of this new digital news outlet was intended as a permanent reminder of and tribute to the DNA of the print newspaper that preceded it (Luo, 2014). The staff union still uses the

name of *Oriental Morning Post*. In his widely circulated and acclaimed opening editorial, Qiu vowed that *The Paper* would dedicate itself to the “the golden age of the liberal 1980s,” thus tapping into the public’s collective memory of the most open period for journalism in China (Meng, 2018, p. 79). Physically, *The Paper* occupies the same building as the *Post* did. The corridor is lined with framed front pages of the *Post*, including its milk powder scandal exposé. Throughout our interview with three senior editors of *The Paper*, their linkage to the *Post* was repeatedly brought up to explain the tradition of quality journalism and commercial orientation *The Paper* prides itself in.

As for tactical repertoires, our interviewees were understandably less forthcoming about how they try to get around obstacles placed by their political minders. If Chinese editors do manage to sustain elements of “golden age” practices, they would know better than to crow about it. Although they are unlikely to state this explicitly, one tactic they employ is professionalism. Zhu Xuedong from *Beijing News* said they valued professionalism not just for their journalistic ideals but also to avoid making politically fatal mistakes: “Doing watchdog journalism makes lots of enemies, who would always jump on any mistakes we make. So we need to be very vigilant and professional. This helps us go through difficult situations.”

Another tactic is an emphasis on audience engagement. *The Paper’s* consumer orientation was evident from editor in chief Liu Yonggang’s habitual glances at his smartphone to check reader reactions to articles. “My phone is on 24/7 so I can keep track of our readers’ feedback,” Liu said. He emphasized the importance of engaging a quality audience that expects “authoritative and progressive news media with conscience.” Plentiful research on Chinese journalism suggests that when the audience’s preferences conflict with party discipline, editors pick their battles. They take calculated risks with some stories while staying clear of absolute no-go areas (Hassid, 2015; Tong, 2007). *The Paper* does both hard-hitting journalism and blatant propaganda; its critical reporting never targets the central government nor the Shanghai municipal government.

By democratic standards, *Beijing News* and *The Paper* may be unimpressive as bastions of independent journalism. But in the semidesert conditions of today’s Chinese journalism, they can be seen as oases helping to sustain the ethos of public interest journalism in a period of abeyance, potentially contributing to its revival if the opportunity structure changes.

### ***Indonesia: Public Interest Journalism Reincarnated***

Democratization in Indonesia, after three decades of authoritarian rule under Suharto’s New Order regime, meant a sudden withdrawal of political restrictions on the media system in 1998. This has enabled the expansion of free media and growing journalistic professionalism (Hanitzsch, 2005), but also ushered in commercial threats familiar in liberal democracies (George & Venkiteswaran, 2019). Unlike the earlier examples, which involved transference of values across different organizations, our Indonesian case involves a single news magazine, *Tempo*, which over a 30-year period went through a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Among our cases, *Tempo* was the most self-conscious and deliberate in devising strategies to bridge the period of abeyance. When their magazine was forcibly interrupted, its leaders shifted into movement mode, ensuring that their newsroom’s professional capacities and norms could be sustained—a dramatic saga recounted in detail in Steele’s (2005) history of the magazine.

*Tempo* was launched in 1971 and rose rapidly to become the country's most respected publication for independent journalism and investigative reporting (Kakiailatu, 2007). From its inception, its publicly stated vision was to be the *Time* magazine of Indonesia. That is still how executives sometimes describe the magazine to foreign audiences. The *Time* comparison is misleading, however. *Tempo* editors' admiration for the American newsweekly is limited to the latter's professional standards. Compared with *Time*, *Tempo*'s professional norms are more inclined to the change-agent role. When asked about the source of its values, the editor at the time, Arif Zulkifli, did not refer to *Time* but to its own activist roots. *Tempo*'s bond with Indonesian civil society and political activism was sealed during a four-year hiatus in the 1990s.

Together with two other publications, *Tempo* was banned in 1994 by the authoritarian New Order regime of President Suharto. As *Tempo* was not part of any larger corporation that could absorb its employees, the banning left its staff in the lurch. The magazine received overtures from potential buyers that, if accepted, would have enabled it to get its publishing license back and save jobs. Senior editors rejected the Faustian bargain. They knew the new owners would not permit them the editorial independence that they considered core to *Tempo*'s values. The regime then offered *Tempo*'s former staff a lifeline by allowing it to be reincarnated as a new title, *Gatra*. Only some journalists took the bait (McCargo, 1999; Steele, 2005).

The banning of *Tempo* effectively turned founding editor Goenawan Mohamad into a social movement activist fighting for press freedom (Lamb, 1998). In her gripping history of the magazine, Steele (2005) relates how Goenawan and other *Tempo* chiefs used their years in limbo: They not only created opportunities to keep their staff employed in journalism jobs but also organized a new independent professional body to challenge the existing pro-establishment editors association.

On the jobs front, the challenge was how the journalists could continue to earn a living without selling out. Goenawan established an editorial services cooperative, RMB, that accepted outsourced journalistic assignments from mainstream media companies. RMB's named editors dealt with clients while the writers remained anonymous in the background, sparing them from associating publicly with media companies they felt were too close to the regime. The arrangement could be viewed as somewhat hypocritical, but the journalists had little choice if they wanted to continue working in paid journalism. Another Goenawan brainchild was ISAI, the Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information. Ostensibly a think tank, it was designed as an underground news organization to further the struggle against the Suharto regime. All its recruits kept clear of demonstrations and open dissent. But ISAI was behind several underground online news services, disseminating stories censored by mainstream media (Steele, 2005).

As for professional solidarity, the banning of *Tempo*, *DeTik*, and *Editor* in 1994 provoked antiregime media workers to organize themselves. They established the Alliance of Independent Journalists (Aliansi Jurnalis Independen, [AJI]) in 1994. AJI itself was outlawed but nonetheless grew to become the leading journalists association in the country. Three years into *Tempo*'s banning, Steele observed in amazement the many informal networks of its former staff still active on various fronts. "The government might have banned *Tempo* three years earlier, but the magazine had hardly disappeared," she wrote (Steele, 2005, p. 1).

The effectiveness of these abeyance strategies was readily apparent when the Suharto regime finally fell to a mass democratic movement in May 1998. A large number of former employees, having remained within the orbit of independent journalism, rejoined the magazine immediately when it was revived that October. It was able to pick up where it left off. Today, the magazine remains a bastion of watchdog and investigative journalism. Furthermore, when Suharto's successor B.J. Habibie suddenly announced that the new government was prepared to relook at press laws along with promised constitutional reforms, AJI (not yet unbanned) was able to seize the initiative and push bold proposals for press freedom (Steele, 2011). The resulting negotiations bequeathed Indonesia with a media system largely protected from government censorship.

The creative and generative activities in the years between *Tempo's* death and revival would be invisible to anyone tracking only to formal news organizations. But they are instantly intelligible through the lenses of radical politics and social movements and provide another case of how journalism's professional ethos is sustained even when its organizational vehicles die. None of these activities was impressive in terms of its size or reach. But they were able to sustain a network of journalists, not just for material support but more importantly to keep alive the habits and instincts of independent journalism.

### **Discussion: From Journalism to Movement**

Discussions about the survival of public interest journalism have rightly focused on the need to develop funding models and legal safeguards enabling free, independent, plural, and safe journalism practice. This article addresses a different question: What do journalists do in the meantime? In many contexts, they have to make do with conditions that are far from optimal. In her analysis of out-of-work American journalists' goodbye letters, Usher (2010) found their reflections "consumed by nostalgia" and thus more self-limiting than forward-looking (p. 923). In contrast, our study highlights journalists exercising considerable agency. To sustain their capacities and core values, they engage in movement-like adaptations that mitigate the limitations of formal news organizations, which are at best temporary receptacles for their professional norms and practices.

Applying the concept of abeyance, we see how journalists tap networks, tactical repertoires, and collective identities to bridge lean periods. Relevant networks include not only news organizations but also professional associations such as the Association of Taiwan Journalists and the Alliance of Independent Journalists in Indonesia. Both were direct responses to attacks on treasured news organizations. China's much tighter restrictions mean that setting up a large independent professional association—even one operating underground like AJI during Suharto-era Indonesia—is out of the question. Instead, professional networking hides in plain sight. Journalists working in (and out of) news organizations such as *The Paper* and *Beijing News* use their shackled autonomy to sustain their professional ethos.

Movement repertoires—time-tested tactics that are rehearsed, revised, and recycled for new situations—also play a key role. *The Reporter's* strict rules protecting editorial independence from financial backers' interference are formulas borrowed from the nonprofit *ProPublica* as well as from the contractual guarantees that journalists tried to extract from *Independence Evening Post* owners in 1994. *Tempo* leaders,

similarly, were anxious to resist capture by big business. In China, where the state poses a bigger threat than the market, *The Paper* focuses more on recycling the *Oriental Morning Post's* tradition of skillfully playing its audience's needs against officials' preferences.

The collective identity of public interest journalism is a resource that all the professionals we spoke with recognized as critically important to sustain the ethos of their ventures. In all three cases, newsroom leaders reached back into the past as well as across corporate and national boundaries to invoke professional norms with which they strongly identified. In China, where an all-powerful party-state disavows the First Amendment model, it is hardly insignificant that the head of a state-owned news organization openly expressed admiration for the (banned) *New York Times*. Globally, though, it should come as no surprise that journalists in more restrictive environments hold the elite media of free societies in high regard. What is less appreciated, and which the present study reveals, is that such journalists also draw substantial inspiration from earlier generations within their own society. In the Chinese case, journalists hark back to a more liberal period. In Taiwan and Indonesia, journalists refer to collective identities forged in more authoritarian times. In part, this reflects the paradox that public support for a free press does not necessarily grow in tandem with press freedom (Nisbet & Stoycheff, 2013); independent journalism may have been more appreciated at a time when democracy was more limited (Joseph, 2013).

We do not claim that abeyance is a watertight concept for interpreting journalism in tough times. One weakness worth highlighting is the risk of overreach: If used too liberally, we may end up aggrandizing all kinds of formal and informal networks as seed banks for public interest journalism, when they may grow into something else entirely or die a permanent death. The repertoires that journalists develop for professional survival are especially difficult to interpret. Most of these involve some element of selective accommodation with the powers that be—in other words, self-censorship. Some will see this as a tactical necessity to serve a larger purpose, while others will interpret it as self-serving conformism. Only in hindsight, if at all, can it be established if certain abeyance tactics resist or perpetuate the forces undermining public interest journalism.

This caveat notwithstanding, we hope the preceding account hints at the rich potential of a movement perspective on public interest journalism, particularly in societies that are not consolidated democracies. This study is obviously limited by the relatively small number of cases and the exploratory nature of the case study method. But the pattern we have described will probably be instantly recognized around the world. In Asia, other prominent examples include Malaysia's *Malaysiakini*, set up by two journalists who wanted to recreate the experience of independent journalism they enjoyed as part of a short-lived investigative projects team in the mainstream *Sun* newspaper. In India, the nonprofit *The Wire* has similarly gathered prominent refugees from corporate media.

Beyond adding cases, the research agenda should also include other lines of inquiry. Just as transnational networks are an important dimension of social movements, public interest journalism demands to be studied as a global movement. Although there is no single universal journalistic paradigm, there are certainly like-minded news organizations operating in diverse media systems and cooperating across borders. Most of the scholarly energy devoted to globalizing journalism studies has been

channeled into comparing countries: Classifying their different media systems, and their professional norms and practices. Yet public interest journalism ventures in most countries (like *The Wire* in Delhi) have less in common with other news organizations in the same city (*The Times of India*, say) than with spiritually aligned projects in other parts of the world (*ProPublica* in the United States or *The Reporter* in Taiwan). Not surprisingly, two of our featured news outlets, *The Reporter* and *Tempo*, have collaborated in cross-border investigative projects. A transnational movement perspective can help us transcend what Couldry and Hepp (2013) critique as “container thinking” in comparative media studies (p. 249).

Equally important, though, are the clear indications that journalists crave domestic sources of inspiration. This has implications for journalism education and training, and media literacy programs as well. Western textbooks and other widely disseminated training resources may fail to tap into the narratives and collective identities that are most meaningful to journalists and publics in other parts of the world. Even if public interest journalism is a globally intelligible language, journalists value their local dialects. Local histories are more relevant and resonant, especially when the leading journalists who lived through that history are still part of the professional scene. This is probably why today’s journalists sometimes speak more passionately about the ghosts of local newspapers’ pasts than thriving but distant exemplars.

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