

Greater Work-Related Stress Among Chinese Media Workers in the Context of Media Transformation: Specific Stressors and Coping Strategies

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A steady rise in unexpected deaths of Chinese media workers from 2011 to 2015 highlights a new social problem. Content analysis of official reports about these deaths reveals the contribution of work-related stress and media transformation. Moreover, surveys and in-depth interviews with 147 Chinese media workers demonstrate that 11 factors related to the current media transformation may magnify work-related stress. These factors stem from characteristics of media transformation, such as the crisis in journalism, the expansion of information and communication technologies, ideological control, and the reorganization of management. This article focuses on newly emerging and Chinese-specific stressors, revealing how media transformation increases stress and causes anxiety. In addition, the article suggests specific coping strategies in the Chinese context.

Keywords: work-related stress, Chinese media transformation, stressors, anxiety, coping strategies

From April 28 to May 27, 2014, six Chinese media workers, most of whom were senior executives, committed suicide because of work-related stress; their average age was 44 years. A further investigation found that the officially reported unexpected deaths of media workers as a result of suicides or acute diseases during all of 2014 amounted to more than 17, which is an increase from seven in 2011,

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eight in 2012, and 11 in 2013, at an average age of younger than 45 years (see Figure 1).² The steady rise in the number of deaths from 2011 to 2015 is verified by the latest occurrence of nine unexpected deaths of workers at an average age of 39 years within 60 days from May to June 2016, according to Xinhua News Agency (Shang, 2016). This is such a new phenomenon in China that it has become a social problem that needs special attention from both researchers and practitioners. Based on facts and official information about the extreme cases of deaths from 2011 to 2015, a detailed content analysis reveals two critical factors contributing to the suicides or diseases: work-related stress and ongoing media transformation.

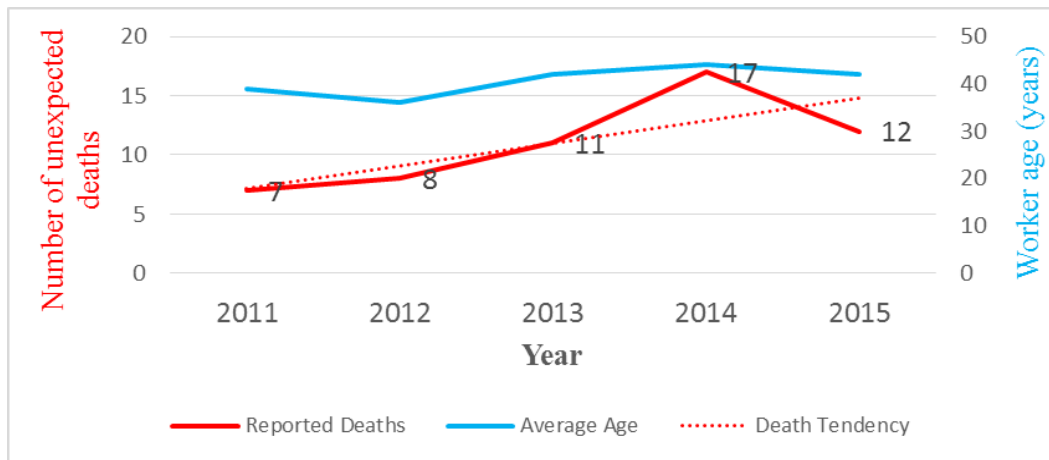


Figure 1. Officially reported unexpected deaths of Chinese media workers, 2011–2015.

A 2010 survey conducted by the Psychology Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences found that 80% of Chinese media workers suffered from severe stress (Wen, Gao, & Li, 2010). Four years later, an investigation led by People.cn of 30 media agencies demonstrated that the rate of stressed employees rose to 90% (Zhang, 2014). In addition to stress, sleep and marriage problems among media workers might also be more serious than they are in other industries. The Chinese Sleeping Index Report in 2015 revealed that media workers had the poorest quality of sleep out of 10 main occupations; the media workers were described as “getting up earlier than roosters and going to sleep later than dogs” (Xin & Gu, 2015, para. 2). Similarly, the latest Chinese Love and Marriage Report indicates that journalists were the most “unwanted” professionals in love and marriage because they were “too busy to date” (Baihe, 2015).

² An *unexpected death* refers to a death that comes without warning, especially when the person is not expected to die in a certain way (such as by suicide or because of an acute disease like a heart attack) or at an early age. *Officially reported* means that news reports, bulletins, or messages were released by official newspapers, obituaries, or social media accounts such as Weibo (China’s equivalent of Twitter) and WeChat (a communicating mobile app). The statistical data in Figure 1 were gathered by all means available, yet are still only the tip of the iceberg because of news suppression and selection.

When it comes to media transformation, heated arguments and debates among academics and practitioners concentrate mainly on whether and how to transform media as well as the possible effects of the transformation; little attention is given to how the transformation influences media workers, especially their mental health (Stevenson, 2014). After all, it is the media workers who are the leaders, participants, and stakeholders of the ongoing transformation. *Media transformation* in this article refers to transforming the media function, structure, ownership, and management from the “Chinese Communist Party-state’s mouthpiece and propaganda tools to multifunctional media” (Shao, Lu, & Hao, 2016, p. 34); from “traditional media to traditional-and-new media convergence” (p. 34); from “state-owned to half private” (p. 37); and from “government agencies to market-oriented enterprises” (p. 29). Investigations into the cases of unexpected deaths since 2011 have revealed that changes brought about by media transformation—such as the crisis in journalism, the expanding impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs), faster work pace, and heavier workload—are closely related to the suicides and anxiety among media workers.

Media workers have been suffering from stress for ages (MacDonald, Saliba, Hodgins, & Ovington, 2016). At present, this mental health problem might have some connection with the ongoing transformation in the media industry, since work-related stress seems more serious and easily goes beyond the physical and mental limits of media workers, leading to a spate of suicides and tragedies. Three questions are pertinent: Is stress among media workers higher in the current context of Chinese media transformation? What are the specific stressors? How can workers best cope with work-related stress in this context? To address these questions, this research used a comprehensive theoretical framework examining (1) stress in terms of concepts, theories, and newsroom stressors and (2) the context and effects of the Chinese media transformation. Next, we conducted surveys and in-depth interviews with 147 Chinese media workers. This research became the basis of a discussion of the newly emerging and Chinese-specific stressors and an exploration of the particular coping strategies.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Stress: Concepts, Theories, and Newsroom Stressors

Stress-Related Concepts

Stress has been defined by Jones (2016) as “the way our bodies react physically, emotionally, mentally, and behaviorally to any change in the status quo” (p. 3). Anxiety can be defined as “an unpleasant emotional state or condition which is characterized by the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, and worry” (Spielberger, 1972, p. 482). These two common concepts of mental health share most of the same physical and psychological symptoms and are often used interchangeably in academic literature and daily conversation (Holmes, 2014). Whereas most acute stress stems from external situations and can be handled, a lot of anxiety results from internal fear and cannot be avoided (Lerner, 2005).

Work-Related Stress Theories

Given that stress can be tackled, its causes and coping strategies for it are the focus of much research (National Institute of Mental Health, 2014). Generally, several theoretical frameworks can be applied for an analysis of work-related stress. The job demand-control model (Karasek, 1979) has dominated research on occupational stress for the past 30 years (Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel, & Schulz-Hardt, 2010). Other developments, such as the person-environment fit model (Lennon, French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1984) and the effort-reward imbalance theory (Siegrist, 1996), also can explain work-related stress from different perspectives at both individual and organizational levels. However, because these models might not reflect universal values or inclusive theories (Chuang, Hsu, Wang, & Judge, 2015), we need to refer to the specificity of the media industry and the unique features of a Chinese context.

Newsroom Stressors

Regarding work-related stress in the media industry, Wines (1986) proposed the term “newsroom burnout” (p. 34) to identify the stress in journalism as early as 1986 and believed it contributed to early deaths. In the 1990s and 2000s, a number of researchers pointed out that the majority of media workers they surveyed were stressed and suffered typical symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, sleeping disorders, and heart attacks (MacDonald et al., 2016). Based on a content analysis of books and articles written by early media workers, Fedler (2004) concluded that nine factors were primarily responsible for work-related stress: “(1) reputation and its consequences, (2) sacrifice and compromise of news ideals, (3) grueling physical and mental demands, (4) long and irregular hours, (5) poverty, (6) intense competition, (7) insecurity, (8) the calamities witnessed, (9) treatment by colleagues” (p. 82). These factors revealed a comprehensive overview of stress sources for traditional media workers.

In new media, the situation is no better. According to *The New York Times*, the fast pace and intense pressure have led to substantial turnover in digital media organizations, and “burnout starts younger” (Peters, 2011, p. B1) than it does in print journalism. Interviews at BBC regional newsrooms revealed that the spread of “multiskilling,” which means working with varied media technologies, in media-convergence newsrooms could “add to stresses on journalists, and affect quality of output” (Wallace, 2013, p. 99). In Finnish newsrooms, older journalists “struggled hard to hold on to their professional values” (Nikunen, 2014, p. 868) during the move toward convergent media characterized by speed and technological skills. Therefore, new variables, such as faster pace, technological multiskills, and media convergence—which are brought about by ICTs—should be added to the traditional nine factors to investigate current newsroom stressors. The specificity and uniqueness of Chinese culture and context also should be taken into consideration in an examination of Chinese newsroom stress.

Chinese Media Transformation: Context and Effects

Context

A historical examination of Chinese media transformation touches on key issues of contemporary politics, ideology, economy, and technology in China, because media transformation is both a causal factor

and a resulting outcome of Chinese reform (Shao et al., 2016). Adopting the "party-state vs. market" paradigm, which was the "dominant framework" (Akhavan-Majid, 2004, p. 553) for analyzing Chinese media transformation and reform, Chu (1994) found that the media industry had always struggled "between change and continuity in ideology, structure, and operation" (p. 4) in the 1942, 1945, and 1956 media reforms since the party's propaganda system was established. According to Zhang (2011), after 1978, when China adopted the policy of reform and opening up comprehensively, media transformation in China could be "divided into three stages known as marketization, conglomeration, and capitalization" (p. 38) which started from the late 1970s, mid-1990s, and 2003, respectively. The first two were mainly driven by commercialization and globalization, respectively, and the ongoing transformation since 2003 is "fundamentally driven by the advances in ICTs, and regulated by political and ideological control" (p. 77).

As for the global context of the ongoing transformation, the crisis facing journalism looms large, with its contours summarized as follows by Zelizer (2015):

Economically, old business models are in a free fall while new alternatives have not yet solidified a pathway to recovery. Morally, scandals and violations of ethical behavior keep public trust in the news media at all-time lows. Occupationally, the traditional view of what journalism should be—objective, detached, balanced—no longer holds. And technologically, the rise and entrenchment of digital media make most explicit what journalism has always tried to keep in its background—its problems with authoritative storytelling, separation from the public, reluctant response to calls for transparency, cozying up to officialdom. (p. 894)

The general result is "the disappearing of many old and well-established news outlets, the dismissal of many reporters, decrease in circulation and audience" (Mancini, 2013, p. 133). "This squeeze on traditional news outlets and their journalists has resulted in the deterioration of journalism quality" (Van der Haak, Parks, & Castells, 2012, p. 2925).

In this global context, the regional circumstance surrounding the Chinese media is even worse, with a 41.14% decrease in total newspaper sales volume during 2015, a 35.4% decrease in advertising revenues, and a wave of press bankruptcy and dismissals of journalists (Cui, 2016). Meanwhile, ICTs (especially mobiles) have become almost ubiquitous in China (Qiu, 2014). By the middle of 2016, mobile-phone Internet users reached 656 million, and the digital news audience amounted to 579 million, increasing by 5.9% and 8.8%, respectively, from 2015 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2016).

In addition to the fall of journalism and the rise of ICTs, the Chinese media has "specific features which are closely in step with the nation's basic political, social system, and ideology" (Sparks & Reading, 1994, p. 245). Hannah (2013) identifies three key variables of the full media transformation in the post-Communist world: "the level of economic and structural development, the strength of the Communist legacy, and the level of governmental intervention" (p. 647). This conclusion reminds us of one distinguishable feature of media transformation in China: that the government "has a vast network of

ideological control over the content of media" (Fung, 2016, p. 3007), and this control "will continue to shape the media policies in order to maintain its strength of legacy" (Zhang, 2011, p. 158).

Effects

Macroscopically, in addition to facing the same challenges as Western countries in terms of the crisis in journalism, the media in China confront specific or unique obstacles in the current transformational process, such as "the inherent contradictions of media attributes, the administrative segmentation of the media market, and the lack of press freedom" (Shao et al., 2016, p. 27). There are also new kinds of censorship and governmental intervention due to political and ideological control in the digital age (Zhang, 2011) and "strict propaganda restrictions even in commercialized media" (Lin, 2004, p. 118). At the micro level, however, the effects of media transformation on the individual worker—such as work-related stress, anxiety, and excessive workload—are seldom discussed by academicians or practitioners.

On all accounts, given the complexity and specificity of the Chinese context and media, "media transformation does not lend itself to analysis by the application of a single theory or framework" (Zhang, 2011, p. 11). Therefore, previous theoretical frameworks such as the job demand-control model, the person-environment fit model, the effort-reward imbalance theory, and Fedler's nine-factor theory were used comprehensively, together with specific features of the Chinese media transformation, to analyze newly emerging stressors and coping strategies. In sum, we have applied a combinational framework of stress versus media transformation to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Chinese media workers' stress. This is the main goal of the research.

Method

We conducted surveys and in-depth interviews with Chinese media workers from 31 media outlets.³ A three-step research approach was used:

First, self-administered questionnaires were distributed in both paper and electronic form (1) to gather information on gender, media types, working years, professional positions, and further contacts; (2) to clearly determine whether respondents felt stressed at work (yes/no) and the symptoms and frequency if they did feel stressed; and (3) to invite the respondents for in-depth interviews.

Second, in-depth interviews were conducted by taking notes with those who reported feeling stressed (those who said yes) in the (first step) questionnaires to find out (1) whether and, if so, how the current media transformation increased their stress; (2) what their stressors were; and (3) what coping strategies they used. The three main interview questions were as follows:

³ The 31 media outlets are composed of 12 newspapers, 10 magazines, five news websites, two social media, a news app, and a publishing press, most of which are based in Hubei Province. All the media outlets are experiencing a transformational process, both tactically and strategically, just like other media in China.

- Q1: *Does the current media transformation (transforming media functions, structure and management, etc.) have some connection with your stress at work? Does it increase your stress?*
- Q2: *What are the causes for your stress at work? Do the new changes in the media industry and ICTs (crisis in journalism, expanding impact of ICTs, etc.) bring new pressure or stress, and how?*
- Q3: *What do you usually do to cope with stress at work?*

Third, data reduction and thematic analysis were applied. First, all the answers, comments, and suggestions from interviewees were collected, analyzed, and summarized. Key points, prominent themes, critical comments, and crucial examples were extracted from the text and were identified and classified into three categories—(1) *yes or no* (whether the media transformation increases stress), (2) *stressors*, and (3) *coping strategies*—targeting the three key questions, respectively. The frequency of each theme or factor was also calculated.

In the first step, questionnaires were distributed at random. In the second step of interviews, we tried to balance interviewees' genders, media-working years, and professional positions to ensure the reliability and validity of the data and information. Questions in both surveys and interviews were revised through pilot tests.

Data Collection and Analysis

From June 2, 2014, to May 1, 2016, we distributed about 200 paper questionnaires and online questionnaires posted in QQ and WeChat groups to Chinese media workers, yielding 147 completed questionnaires.⁴ Among the 147 respondents, 122 selected media workers were successfully interviewed. With the three key questions fully discussed and data carefully analyzed, the following results were gathered from surveys and interviews.

In the surveys, when asked to give an unambiguous answer about whether they feel stressed at work, all the survey respondents (100%, $N = 147$) said yes. Meanwhile, 13.6% (20 respondents) thought their working pressures were high but acceptable, and 86.4% (127 respondents) felt stressed at work at least twice a week and would like to be able to cope with it (see Figure 2). This result was consistent with previous research concerning newsroom burnout and work-related stress, indicating an increase in stress.

⁴ QQ is a Chinese instant messaging software with 1 billion registered users in 80 countries. WeChat is a communicating mobile app with more than 1 billion created accounts. Online questionnaires were posted in QQ and WeChat groups where media workers throughout the country gathered via QQ and WeChat accounts, getting e-copies of feedback. Interviews were conducted mainly face-to-face, supplemented by online ones via QQ and WeChat messengers.

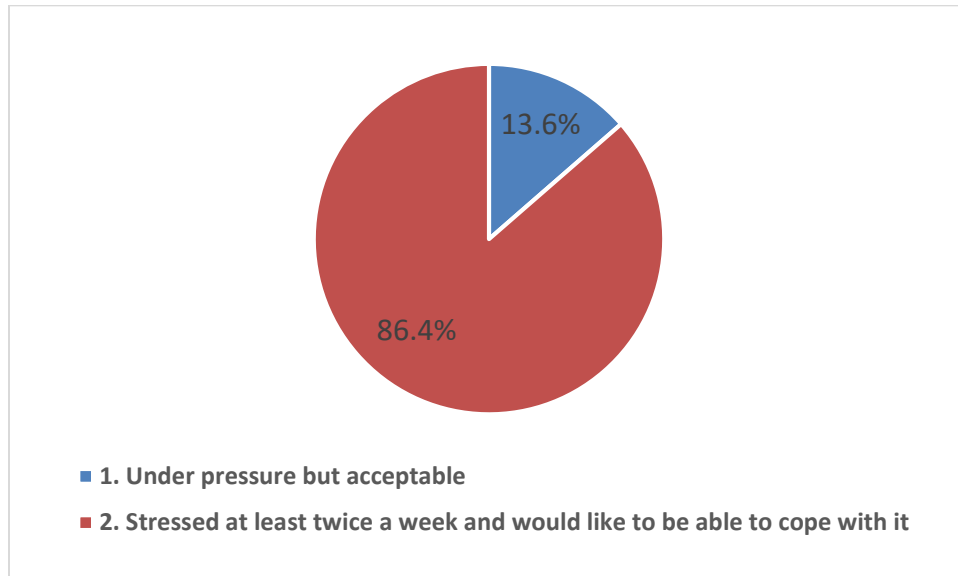


Figure 2. All survey respondents (N = 147) feel stressed at work; 13.6% of respondents (N = 20) feel a high but acceptable level of stress, and 86.4% of respondents (N = 127) feel stressed at work at least twice a week and would like to be able to cope with it.

In the interviews, the ratio of male to female interviewees and the ratio of traditional to new media were generally consistent with the industry as a whole. The average length of time working in media of the 122 interviewees was 19 years. So most of them have experienced the current transformation of the Chinese media industry from the very beginning since 2003 (Zhang, 2011) and have witnessed the arrival of new ICTs as well as the crisis in journalism (see Table 1). From these perspectives, the sample can be somewhat representative.

Table 1. Details of the 122 Interviewees.

Types	Group 1	Group 2	Note
Forms of media they work in	Traditional ($n = 69$)	New ($n = 53$)	Interviewees in both media
Gender	Male ($n = 83$)	Female ($n = 39$)	Interviewees of both genders
Working years	<13 years ($n = 65$)	≥ 13 years ($n = 57$)	Average 19 years
Others	Random acquaintances and strangers		Ensure reliability

In the interviews, when asked whether they have been experiencing greater work pressure during the process of media transformation since around 2003, 11% (13 interviewees) said there seemed to be no difference, 10% (12 interviewees) thought it was hard to say except for more work and less pay, and 79% (97 interviewees) admitted their work pressures had become greater (see Figure 3). These responses can be viewed as evidence that the current media transformation magnifies work-related stress.

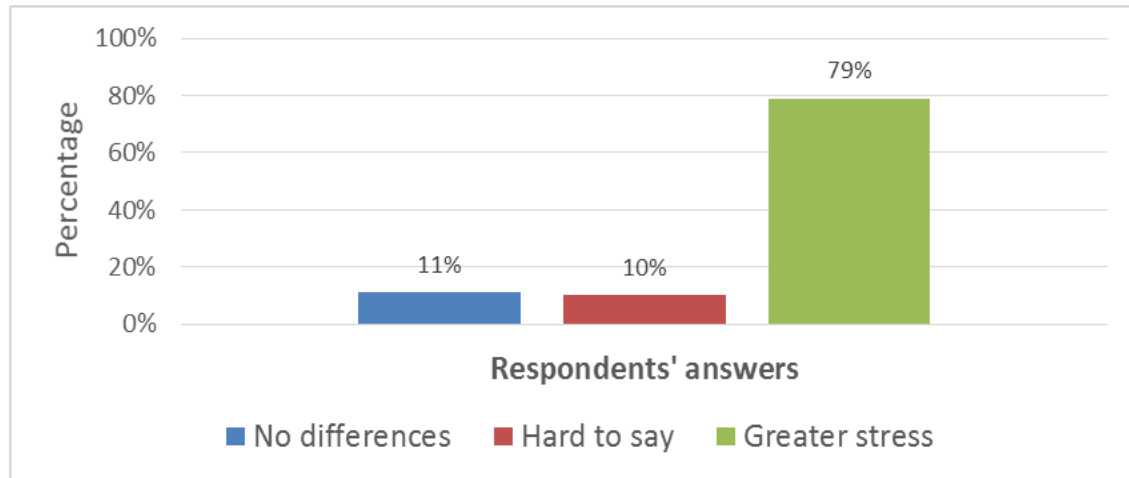


Figure 3. The current media transformation has increased the work pressure of most of the 122 interviewees.

In the interviews, when asked about their stressors, 101 out of 122 interviewees talked about their own perceptions. Some of them mentioned multiple causes of stress; the other 21 respondents either did not reply or thought the stressors were hard to identify. By summarizing and classifying the answers, we found that seven issues were mentioned most often: decrease in salary and wage inequality (mentioned by 41.6%); faster work pace and heavier workload (36.6%); potential of dismissal or job insecurity (35.6%); governmental intervention and content censorship (35.6%); changeable and stricter standards for performance appraisals (29.7%); intense competition inside and outside the organization (21.8%); and a sacrifice of professionalism due to media audience's habit of speed and fragmented reading (19.8%) (see Table 2). Interviewees also offered four other causes of stress: lack of freedom of the press; technological multiskills; online public opinion; and calamities they witnessed. These four were not frequently mentioned and are relatively new. All 11 factors stem from some features of the current media transformation—that is, the crisis in journalism, the impact of ICTs, ideological control, a transforming management, and increasing emergency incidents.

Table 2. Stressors and Their Percentages According to the Interviewees (N = 101).

No.	Stressor	n	%	Characteristic of the media transformation
1	Decrease in salary and wage inequality	42	41.6	Crisis in journalism
2	Faster work pace and heavier workload	37	36.6	Impact of ICTs
3	Potential of dismissal or job insecurity	36	35.6	Crisis in journalism
4	Government intervention, content censorship, or news suppression	36	35.6	Political and ideological control
5	Changeable and stricter standards for performance appraisals	30	29.7	Transforming management
6	Intense competition inside and outside the organization	22	21.8	Impact of ICTs
7	A sacrifice of professionalism due to speed and fragmented reading	20	19.8	Crisis in journalism
8	Lack of press freedom	8	7.9	Political and ideological control
9	Technological multiskills	5	5.0	Impact of ICTs
10	Online violence, such as Internet users' insults, and privacy intrusion due to coverage	3	3.0	Impact of ICTs
11	The calamities witnessed, such as earthquakes, explosions, terrorist attacks, and shipwrecks	2	2.0	Increasing emergency incidents

These data are convincing evidence for the need to explore the connection between the current media transformation and media workers' work-related stress. Research findings concluded from these results and illustrated by interviewees' answers are discussed in detail in the next section.

Research Findings

Based on the results and data, there are sound arguments for five findings.

Argument 1

The majority of media workers feel stressed at work in the present context of media transformation. Compared with the traditional nine-factor theory, we have identified two newly emerging stressors (the crisis in journalism and the impact of ICTs) and two Chinese-specific stressors (ideological control and transforming management).

First, the “change–react” definition of stress states that it is a mental or psychological reaction to any change in the status quo (Jones, 2016). Transformation is one of the biggest changes in Chinese journalism today. China is also struggling with dramatic and fundamental social transformation (Guthrie, 2012). According to this change–react theory, a significant transformation in the industry can create or exacerbate stress among media workers. Moreover, respondents’ close-ended answers in the surveys (100% and 86.4%) support this argument.

Second, the traditional nine factors described by Fedler (2004) and mentioned earlier are West-oriented and outdated. By contrast, 11 main factors were mentioned by 101 interviewees in the present research, including some special or new factors, such as changeable performance appraisals, a sacrifice of professionalism, lack of freedom of the press, technological multiskills, and online public opinion. All 11 of these newly reported factors result mainly from four characteristics of the current media transformation: a crisis in journalism, advances in ICTs, political and ideological control, and a transforming management (see Table 2). The first two characteristics are newly emerging stressors, whereas the last two are Chinese-specific. The person-environment fit model (Lennon et al., 1984), defined as the degree to which individual and environmental characteristics match, indicates that stress is related to the level of fit of a person’s abilities, needs, and demands from the environment and the resources it supplies. Crisis in journalism means a decline in journalism resources, such as salary and numbers of jobs available. Meanwhile, advances in ICTs, ideological control, and a transforming management all exert higher physical and mental demands on media workers. A lower level of fit implies greater stress. From this perspective, the argument is also supported.

Generally, each stressor or factor may trigger some degree of stress or anxiety—for example, the two newly emerging stressors can lead to identity and occupational anxiety, whereas the two Chinese-specific stressors can result in ideological and value anxiety. Typically, all stressors or factors play comprehensive roles together in magnifying the perceived stress.

Argument 2

The two newly emerging stressors can lead to some common anxieties in both Western countries and China, such as identity anxiety due to the crisis in journalism and occupational anxiety due to the impact of ICTs.

Identity Anxiety Due to the Crisis in Journalism

Global journalism is experiencing “a journey without map” because of crisis. In the United States, most journalists even see journalism going in the “wrong direction” (Willnat & Weaver, 2014, p. 3). This uncertain direction of transformation seems to exacerbate media workers’ anxiety, because happiness

results from comparison and fear from aimlessness. One interviewee named Nie K,⁵ who worked as a managing editor of a news magazine, described the aimless fear like this:

On one hand, traditional media surely feel the situation is grim and they have to transform; on the other hand, they just don't know how to change, where to turn. The pressure of their plight is strengthened when they simply turn to new media. New media can be replaced quickly by newer media, let alone to think about its profit model, its pros and cons.

Su Z L, an executive editor with 23 years of media work experience, explained how this sense of uncertainty could spread anxiety and stress among his colleagues:

The winter of the press, the gloom surrounding the profession and its future, falling circulation and advertisement . . . are the daily topics of media workers. A loss of identity, an unknown direction, and an uncertain future will unavoidably exacerbate infectious negative emotions, filling the newsroom with stress and anxiety. This is extremely terrible for a man in his forties, like me.

Identity in this context refers to "the roles, and social group memberships that define who a person is" (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012, p. 69), and the person who proudly speaks of his profession and answers the question of "Who are you?" with his job's title identifies himself with his job (Goffman, 2009). Nevertheless, individuals may suffer from identity anxiety and crisis brought about by profound and irreversible changes (Huskinson & Stein, 2014). In a fundamental crisis and transformation of global journalism, therefore, media workers suffer from identity anxiety especially when they try to look ahead but can only see a gloomy future.

Occupational Anxiety Due to the Impact of ICTs

While identity anxiety prevails in traditional media, occupational anxiety permeates new media. Advances in ICTs bring the new media, and the result is a faster work pace and heavier workload, especially long and irregular hours, which contributes to occupational anxiety. For instance, Zhai Y P, director of a news app, depicted the change from traditional to new media during the transformation:

After traditional media are transformed to new media, the working time of 24/7 becomes prevalent. Our working pace is compressed from a monthly, weekly, daily publishing process into hour, minute, or even second units, because what we are dealing with now is not periodic press or publications but the ever-updating websites, news apps, and official social media accounts.

⁵ The names of the interviewees throughout are semi-anonymous with their family name and the initial letter of given names. Names which are not sensitive information in this research have been semi-structured like this to distinguish, yet not to identify, the individual interviewee.

Many workers at the new media frontier like Zhai need to refresh the electronic screen around the clock. In the new media environment, the workday extends to night, while the work pace gets faster and faster, making media workers always on call. Zhai's colleague Ma X J disclosed their working schedule: "Only in our news app's headline column, there are 24-hour continuous updates and tweets. Breaking news is often released around 2 or 3 a.m. in early mornings. My colleague and I operate it in shifts day and night." Obviously, the work time is highly fragmented. Particularly, with the rise of the mobile Internet, media workers who have been online for 24 hours a day often experience "eating disorders," "irregular sleep," and "work pressure," and they "become physically and mentally exhausted," according to Chen and Li, editors of an official news website.

Furthermore, online public opinion in the form of audience interaction and feedback, which is a new stressor brought about by digital media according to the interviewees, can be another cause of occupational anxiety. Because of online public opinion, an executive chief editor named Zhai X B and his colleagues experienced occupational anxiety throughout the process of "news gathering, writing and releasing":

We are under pressure when no good news is released. However, the pressure is even greater when we have pieces of valuable news released and spread broadly online, being afraid of offending government officials, afraid of flaws and errors in the coverage, afraid of arousing public opinion, afraid of causing grave consequences, afraid of bringing in online insults from the Internet audience, afraid of privacy intrusion by radical Web users.

In addition, occupational anxiety includes ethical anxiety. According to some interviewees, the pursuit of speed and timeliness inevitably leads to difficulties and mistakes in verifying the news source and its accuracy. Information overload makes it difficult to capture the truth, and, ultimately, "unconsciously fake news" is produced (Luo Y C, a managing editor for more than 15 years). This might cause ethical anxiety among media workers who pursue news ideals.

Argument 3

Compared with Western countries, Chinese media workers also suffer some special or unique anxieties owing to two Chinese-specific stressors: ideological anxiety due to ideological control and value anxiety due to transforming management.

Ideological Anxiety Due to Ideological Control

After examining the party-state's ideological and political censorship in journalism, Zhang (2011) points out that many Chinese media, be they commercial, professional, or political, tend to make use of the party-state's ideological and political needs to further their own economic interests, which is "unique and most challenging" (p. 191). In this case, however, the conflicts between ideological control and the rules of communication and the needs of the audience rise sharply in the context of commercialization and globalization. This example is given by a TV program director, Zhang X L:

In the 2016 Spring Festival TV Galas, endorsed by the Ministry of Culture and censored in person by top leaders in charge of propaganda and ideology, the government has simply found the best opportunity to convey ideological and propaganda messages to the widest audience. But in the face of marketization and commercialization, the 2016 Galas hosted by the state-owned CCTV was heavily criticized as “a propaganda disaster” and was protested in various ways by a worldwide audience for the lack of novelty value in the gala shows. Finally, all the blame has been put on the staff of CCTV.

Moreover, there seems to be little autonomy for media workers to meet the needs of the audience and rules of communication because of content censorship. In the newsroom, frequent withdrawal of significant news and reports is common practice due to such censorship or news suppression.

Sometimes, the government can even directly intervene in the operation of the media, whose ownership is becoming half public and half private, for political and economic reasons, but takes little responsibility for its decision. For instance, Shao G S, who has 22 years of media work experience, shared this observation:

On October 28, 2013, under the direct leadership of CCP Shanghai Committee, Shanghai’s two leading press groups, Jiefang Daily Group and Wenhui-Xinmin United Press Group, merged to establish China’s biggest newspaper company, Shanghai United Media Group. This consolidation was widely thought to aim at driving growth and fortifying ideological control in response to the trend of media transformation.

Essentially, the objective of this kind of consolidation is not to expand but to shrink in the media market. First, the number of newspapers and jobs is reduced because of a decrease in total budget after the merger. Second, there is a redistribution of resources within the new group. The redistribution, however, is driven not by the market but by the governmental power. Thus, talents and resources would flow from the group’s highly marketized newspapers, such as *Oriental Morning Post* and *Shanghai Morning Post*, into the official party newspapers, such as *Jiefang Daily* and *Wenhui Daily*. As a result, the more competitive newspapers lose their advantages (Chen, 2013). It is said that the well-known *Oriental Morning Post* will cease publication on January 1, 2017 (Zhou, 2016). This can be seen as evidence of an unsuccessful merger. According to *The New York Times*, a number of similar consolidations led by the party or government in Shanghai and throughout the country over the past 10 years have mostly turned out to be fruitless (Chen, 2013).

The job demand-control model (Karasek, 1979) states that work-related stress increases when high job demands in the form of workload or skill requirements are coupled with lack of control over decision making. Therefore, ideological control, censorship, and multidimensional ownership in the transformational process would increase media workers’ stress considerably.

Value Anxiety Due to Transforming Ownership and Management

Since the ownership of Chinese media has been changing from totally state-owned to half public and half private (Shao et al., 2016), the management team appointed by the government usually have political identity and official titles; new employees do not have such status and are only supported by labor contracts. As a result, value conflicts appear between higher and lower staff. According to Huang Y M, who has 23 years of media experience and now is a chief designer, "being public institutions, media outlets nowadays are managed like private enterprises. Leaders pursue greater political power and a higher official title, while employees prefer better income and welfare." It is this difference that causes conflicts of value and interest between management teams and employees. Li Q, a newspaper journalist, summarized the conflicts as follows:

It is hard to make profit in a declining market, particularly when some want the media to serve the government and others want to serve the audience and customers. And when there is eventually profit, some want to turn over more of it to the government and get promoted in political status, while others want to keep more of it in order to increase income and improve welfare.

Due to their multidimensional ownership and the supreme policy of placing news agencies under government supervision, much of the profit earned by media is handed over to the local or central government. By doing this, some managing leaders gain higher political identity at the expense of most employees' income and welfare. Contradictions between them will become irreconcilable, which causes anxiety on both sides. From a global perspective, the average annual income of Chinese media workers, taking journalists as an example, is roughly one-fifth that of journalists in the United States and the United Kingdom and only one-seventh that of journalists in Japan (QMP, 2015; see Figure 4). According to the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996), when employees make efforts for which they do not feel rewarded, it creates a stressful imbalance. With greater efforts but less rewards, media workers would inevitably suffer stress and anxiety because of conflicting values.

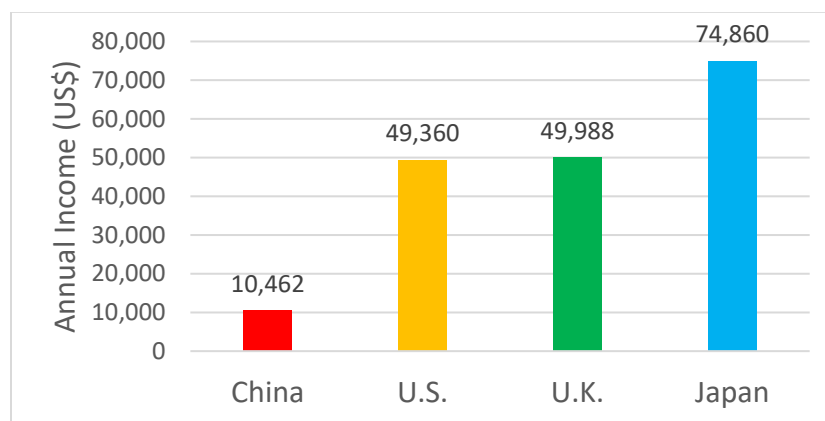


Figure 4. The average annual income of journalists in four nations in 2015.

Argument 4

Since both newly emerging and Chinese-specific stressors are often intertwined and play comprehensive roles, the current media transformation makes work-related stress greater than ever before.

In the context of the crisis in global journalism and developments in ICTs, a transforming media structure and management, coupled with ideological control, magnifies the work-related stress by strengthening the traditional stressors and creating new kinds of stress and anxiety. The open-ended responses by interviewees (79%) support this argument of increased levels of work-related stress and anxiety.

According to an interviewee named Zhao H S, an editor-in-chief with 28 years of media experience, a prevalent model dictates that "transformation increases competition, competition promotes quantification, and quantification magnifies tension." Typically, when more traditional media are heading toward the new media frontier, the competition among them has become more intense. In this case, while the previous performance appraisal of earning work points by publishing news shows no change, the media practitioner's work has been required to adapt to developments in digital media and communication technologies (Xia, 2013). Because of rapid technological development, the concepts, models, methods, and channels of communication processes in digital media keep changing. As a result, in addition to the work points measured by the amount of news published, the numbers of news reprints, clicks, Web hits, page views, and netizen comments and the degree of news scarcity have all become parts of quantitative performance appraisals. A news editor, Wang C, evaluated one of the standards:

To pay by views and clicks seems a reasonable way, brought by new technology, of inspiring authors and connecting readers. But it will diminish the value of our news and lead to sensationalism eventually. This is a frustrating ethical issue.

Zhou P, a journalist for 12 years, described the ever-changing standards he had experienced:

Journalists' performance was initially evaluated based on the number of news reports published; and then plus a news rating system; then plus a comprehensive measuring standard including the number of forwards by other media, especially news apps; then plus the scarcity of news sources; and, very recently, in order to win over the media competition, a committee assessing the most valueless news has been established. If some journalist's news is judged as valueless, it would be a great damage to his performance.

In many cases, the changing performance appraisal standards resulted in complaints from interviewees: "there are upper income limits yet no lower limits"; "the person who achieves the least points compared with his peer colleagues in the performance evaluation will be laid off from his position"; sometimes "you can hardly know how much you can get because rules, positions, and standards change all the time" (Xu J, Wang Y T, and He Q, art designers). Furthermore, similar changeable performance

appraisals are widely adopted throughout Chinese media outlets to keep pace with advances in ICTs. According to the change-react model (Jones, 2016), ever-expanding technological development and ever-changing standards for performance appraisals will undoubtedly increase work-related stress among media workers by generating a lasting sense of tension.

Argument 5

In the Chinese context, coping strategies arising from the interviews can be applied socially, organizationally, and personally.

Socially, what we need urgently is legitimate protection of the right to work and rights in work. With the continuous innovation of ICTs, especially artificial intelligence, and precise standardization of media management, the work of media workers has trended toward despecialization and deskilling to some extent, becoming more and more substitutable (Xia & Li, 2016). Like other common laborers, media workers today are in a weak bargaining position in labor relations. They need to be protected from unfair dismissal, arbitrary pay cuts, low wages, long and irregular working hours, and a sense of insecurity and uncertainty in life and work, thereby ensuring a long-term sustainable development of the whole industry.

Organizationally, a classified media management and standardized personnel system is extremely necessary in the current Chinese media industry. Confucius said, "Anxiety lies in inequality rather than scarcity." The existing Chinese policy of placing news outlets under government supervision and the prevailing Western principle of news resources allocated by market should be applied separately to different media, ensuring a fair and reasonable income distribution and reducing conflicts of value and interest between leaders and employees. As two former editors-in-chief suggest: "This requires a clear management distinction between official media teams and market-oriented media groups based on which official media are to act as mouthpieces for the party-state and market-oriented media to fully compete in the market" (Jiang Z S, more than 30 years, former president and editor-in-chief). And "a professional personnel system of value-created, performance-oriented, skill-based assessment ought to be established and implemented" (Cai H D, former general manager and editor-in-chief). These basic initiatives are particularly important in a transforming context.

Individual efforts can be made to relieve stress. Although this article mostly focuses on the external causes and solutions to media workers' stress and anxiety, the problem is still very much an internal one that can be addressed via workers' self-adjustment, self-regulation, and self-decompression. Three key issues mentioned frequently by our interviewees could be valuable, especially in Chinese culture: (1) identify and follow your core values, even regarding news ideals; (2) mix in pleasures and diversify your income; (3) get personal, organizational, and social support. Some interviewees also recommended learning from workers in other industries.

Discussion

The five arguments in our research findings contribute to previous research to some degree. The first argument not only provides new convincing evidence for the fact that the majority of media workers are suffering work-related stress but points out the relationship between this stress and the current media transformation, identifying the newly emerging and Chinese-specific stressors by comparing them with Fedler's previous nine-factor theory. The second argument mainly focuses on how the two newly emerging stressors, the crisis in journalism and the impact of ICTs, strengthen common stress and anxiety, such as identity and occupational anxiety. The third argument primarily concentrates on how the two Chinese-specific stressors, ideological control and transforming management, trigger special or unique stress such as ideological and value anxiety. The fourth argument indicates that all the stressors, both newly emerging and Chinese-specific ones, tend to play roles comprehensively, not separately or singly, which makes the work-related stress greater than ever before. The last argument proposes some specific solutions that arise from this particular research and the Chinese context. All these findings, enriched by detailed information obtained from the interviewees, have responded to the three research questions.

However, regarding the first argument, the question concerning work-related stress in connection with media transformation was directly introduced by the researchers, not provided by open answers from interviewees. Although the questions were open-ended and semistructured, being prone to bias was a limitation of this research. Another bias seemed to lie in the answers by respondents to the questionnaire: when asked to give an unambiguous answer about whether they felt stressed at work, all respondents (100%, $N = 147$) said yes. Faced with a crisis in journalism, the respondents were prone to give a biased complaint rather than an objective response. Therefore, more efforts should be made to minimize the bias from both the interviewers and interviewees in research method and design.

Overall, the present study provides a new theoretical framework for analyzing media transformation by examining the mental health of its leaders instead of exploring media transformation's significance, direction, or possible outcome. Specifically, rather than adopt the usual party-state-versus-society or party-state-versus-market framework, the study endorses a more human-oriented perspective.⁶ It might deepen our understanding of not only the influence of media reform and transformation but the sacredness of the life and dignity of humans in the context of social change and technology expansion.

Regarding this social problem, another critical problem arises: Compared with workers in other social arenas or industries, do media workers endure greater stress in the context of the current social transformation and ICT advancement? Or do they simply make more complaints and appeals because they

⁶ The human-oriented perspective, which prioritizes people's needs, desires, and conditions over the development of an organization, industry, or even the nation as a whole, was first introduced by the ancient Chinese politician and thinker Guan Zhong (723–645 BC). This was during the Spring and Autumn Period, and emphasized the fundamental position and status of humans. The human-oriented perspective was later extensively advocated by Chinese thinkers such as Mencius, Jia Yi, and Zhang Dai, and Western philosophers such as Protagoras, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx. Now it is widely used as a term in management and psychology (Zhang & Fang, 2004).

have the power and access to speak in public? This problem, which can be another limitation of present study and a direction of future research, may offer a profound understanding of social transformation as well as critical thinking about technological advances.

Conclusion

“All media are extensions of our human bodies, senses, and minds”—McLuhan (1994, p. 116) made this argument half a century ago. New media, nevertheless, can also imprison human bodies and minds. New changes, such as the crisis in journalism, feeding the need for speed and technological multiskills, or even the rise of robot journalism, have been mixing with old relationships such as ethical anxiety and calamities witnessed, leading to widespread mental health problems and even tragedies. This issue becomes such a serious social problem that the transforming media industry has destroyed some of its best people, yet there is no way to calculate the exact number. Some media workers have collapsed, and others have become sleepless, unwanted in relationships, alcoholics or drug addicts; still others have died young, sometimes by suicide. For professionals to defend themselves in a changing world of technological explosion, we must gain a deeper understanding of this social problem.

By conducting surveys and in-depth interviews, this study examines the relationship between work-related stress and the current media transformation, which are the two critical factors contributing to the social problem. Research findings demonstrate that the current media transformation could magnify work-related stress, and 11 intensively reported factors, which stem from four social environmental stressors, are revealed. The study also explores the specific coping strategies mentioned by the interviewees.

Particularly, instead of the typical party-state-versus-market framework, the study endorses a more human-oriented perspective to analyze the hotly debated media transformation by examining the mental health of its representatives. Although prone to bias in methodology, the study helps us better understand the special or unique challenges that Chinese media workers face as the current transformation deepens. It also provides comprehensive proposals for Chinese media workers to defend themselves in the context of the crisis in journalism, compounded by technological explosion. Given the complexity of Chinese media transformation, we do not expect that this problem will be easily solved. With these proposals, however, we do believe that a pursuit of economic and social benefits on the basis of fair and reasonable income distribution, a pursuit of news ideals on the basis of strong occupational security, and a pursuit of sound media transformation on the basis of solid talent pools will pull many media workers out of stress and increase their courage to embrace future changes.

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