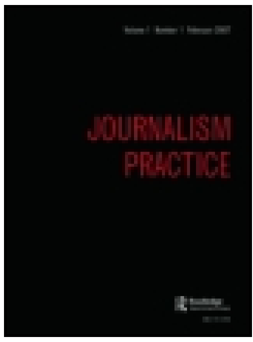

Journalism Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjop20

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To cite this article: Nairui Xu & Robert E. Gutsche Jr. (2020): “Going Offline”: Social Media, Source Verification, and Chinese Investigative Journalism During “Information Overload”, Journalism Practice, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2020.1776142

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1776142

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JOURNALISM PRACTICE
https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1776142

"Going Offline": Social Media, Source Verification, and Chinese Investigative Journalism During "Information Overload"

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ABSTRACT
Based on interviews with 25 investigative journalists in Beijing, China, this study suggests digital journalists may be increasingly challenged by a sense of "information overload" as they navigate social media and online environments crowded with dis- and misinformation, fake profiles and sources, and massive amounts of opinion journalism that is presented as professional journalism. This overload has reinforced Chinese investigative journalists' dedication to a conventional form of verification: meeting face-to-face with sources. This study contributes to scholarship on Chinese journalism by expanding knowledge about investigative journalists in the country and by complicating understandings of how journalists there work in an age of social media, disinformation, and increased interests in verification.

KEYWORDS
China; disinformation; "information overload"; investigative journalism; social media; sources; verification

Introduction

On 7 September 2017, the founder of an online phone app, WePhone, Su Xiangmao, was found dead of suspected suicide. Written on a note, the man allegedly said he was being pressured by his "vicious" ex-wife to hand over the equivalent of £1.2 million (Liu 2018). An abundance of information relating to the death—including details about the ex-wife's demands for money—overwhelmed Chinese social media. Journalists scurried for information. Watching how social media spread accusations against both the wife and the husband that could give clues to the man's suicide, one investigative journalist in Beijing (Participant 13) began to search for the "truth" about the case.

Specifically interested in information about claims made by Su's wife and information about what appeared in the suicide note, the journalist was drawn to information posted by one user on Weibo in particular. "I contacted this person to verify the details he mentioned about Su's ex-wife," the journalist said, "however, he said he didn't know, and that he is a *duan zi shou,*" a person who operates as an online satirist or "joke player." While the journalist initially suspected the user's details might have been true, but it was only through the verification off of social media that the journalist was able to debunk it. As this example illustrates, and as this study discusses, investigative journalists in China—those who focus on issues that are in the public interest, attempt to unveil information that is veiled by the political elite, and provide a deeper analysis of news that would

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appear in daily journalism while still operating under political control (Tong 2011; Wang 2016)—are increasingly turning to verifying information offline by meeting with sources rather than analyzing only the source's content (Bei 2013), as is the case in much Western journalism (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016).

How journalists in China measure the credibility of online sources is an increasing area for study, particularly in a time of increased mis- and dis-information on social media (i.e., Jian and Liu 2018; Zeng, Burgess, and Bruns 2019). At its core, this article contributes to understandings of how investigative journalists in Beijing prefer to verify information they find online by meeting offline with sources rather than by using online and social media tools, practices dominant in the West (Amazeen 2020). Based on interviews with 25 investigative journalists in Beijing in 2017, this paper argues that digital journalists are increasingly challenged by a sense of "information overload" as they navigate social media and online environments crowded with dis- and mis-information, fake profiles and sources, and massive amounts of opinion journalism that is presented as professional journalism. This overload has led to these journalists interrogating social media users in offline environments to verify the credibility of information for their reporting.

This study begins with an overview on scholarship about social media and journalistic verification online in a global effort to identity truthful information amid growing channels of mis- and dis-information. We then discuss major elements associated with journalism in China, particularly investigative journalism, including the role of verification and social media before discussing the concept of "information overload" and its characteristics in a digital age. We then present major themes that emerged from interviews with investigative journalists in Beijing about the challenges they experience with sorting swaths of information on social media to find news, their use of offline reporting to verify information, and their concerns about the future of using social media for verification purposes. We conclude by contemplating the meanings inherent in the epistemological challenges of online—and offline—verification identified by these investigative journalists.

Social Media and Verification in Western Societies

As much of Journalism Studies research on verification occurs in Western contexts, it is important to begin by addressing the dominant challenges with journalism, truth, and verification from which to diverge for the purposes of this study. Challenges to public notions of "truth" in recent years have been aligned with political and journalistic speech aligned with the rise of populism in governments from across Europe, to the United States, and to parts of the Global South (Katz and Mays 2019). Elevated by discourse aimed at journalism related to governance following the 2016 presidential election in the U.S., scholars have targeted in on the influence of social media to sway voters, inform journalism about politics and social conditions, as well as to position government bodies (such as the European Union) and journalists as fact-checkers and authorities on the truth (Gutsche 2018).

Considerable research explores practices of journalistic verification in Western journalism (Godler and Reich 2013; 2017; Graves 2016; Hermida 2012; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014). While there are various ways journalists verify information—from critically questioning sources and their credibility to double- and triple-checking facts—journalists report that they desire accurate information for their reporting (Godler and Reich 2017; Martin

2017; McNair 2017) and argue that verification is "a critical part of the news-gathering and information dissemination process" (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016, 325).

Western journalists focus on fact-checking and use of social media in the quest to approach, identify, and spread what is considered to be true (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016). In recent years, along with the prevalence of social media, a large number of Western scholars find that journalistic verification is extremely important in the digital age from two aspects: On one hand, journalists have to determine what to verify among huge amounts of information and sources (Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2016; Van Leuven et al. 2018). On the other hand, journalists are increasingly using social media to verify information and sources (Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019), using a myriad tools, including Twitter and Facebook (Brandtzaeg, Følstad, and Chaparro Domínguez 2018; Schifferes et al. 2014; Coddington, Molyneux, and Lawrence 2014).

Additionally, recent scholarship suggests use of online tools for verification surround political journalism (Broersma and Graham 2012; Coddington, Molyneux, and Lawrence 2014) and moments when online tools augment offline verification practices (Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2016; Van Leuven et al. 2018; Godler and Reich 2013). These settings, tools, and practices often serve as guidance for journalistic practices and research about practice in other societies—particularly in terms of measuring a society's journalistic contributions to the public. Yet, these social contexts, tools for seeking and verifying information, and the very role of journalism in society are shaped by deeper cultural and social values of a society, making generalized discussions of "truth," journalism, and journalistic practice less helpful and accurate (Hallin and Mancini 2012). Therefore, in the section below we discuss journalism in a Chinese context in ways that focus on how journalists in China approach "truth" and "facts" in digital journalism today.

Digital Journalism in a Chinese Context

It is acknowledged by scholars that Chinese journalism is practiced under tight political control by the Communist Party of China (Brady 2008; Tong and Sparks 2009; Zhou 2000). Erroneously, this news media environment is often characterized as propagandistic, where journalism serves as a mouth piece of the Communist Party (Hassid 2011). It is the case that journalists who work in licensed news organizations are certified with press identification cards and are regulated by the General Administration of Press and Publication (Shirk 2011; Stockmann 2013), and that the Cyberspace Administration of China[1] monitors the release and actions of internet-based information posted by users. Still, licensing for news organizations does not extend to web portal media (internet-based commercial news websites), such as Sina, Sohu, and Netease, which allows for more freedom among media workers to produce independent content, though it may still fall under government scrutiny (Chan, Lee, and Pan 2006).

Chinese journalism is shaped by multiple factors beyond the influence of the Communist Party. Journalists work amid social and cultural values and pressures, often influenced by the interests and desires of political and business elites (Wang and Sparks 2019). Such interests based upon economic and governmental demands are observed as especially disruptive to news production in local (provincial) journalism as they attempt to gain resources for digital innovation to increase regional economic gains (Repnikova and Fang 2019). Despite having more resources to do their journalism by tending to work in large cities (Zhang and Cao

2017), investigative journalists also face technological and social pressures coming from increased engagement with the public online (Tang and Sampson 2012).

While many social and cultural pressures shape journalism throughout China, today's enhanced autonomy from overt state pressures for Chinese journalism in a digital age, emerging from the marketization of media in the 1970s, has allowed media practitioners to craft practical strategies to expand boundaries of reporting. Chinese journalists, particularly investigative journalists, demonstrate their desire for autonomy to report what they deem important for the public as a way to differentiate themselves from other types of journalism (Sæther 2008). And, throughout China, journalists are practicing what may be considered Western styles of journalism, as it speaks for vulnerable people (Hassid 2016). To account for the potential for news to be governmental propaganda, journalists turn to practical tactics, such as introducing more news sources to journalistic products, that put government information in greater context (Tong 2011). Through this process, journalists provide more independent media content while complying with government standards.

Digital innovation has also provided more opportunities for journalists to produce and share reporting. Social media platforms, such as Weibo,[2] allow journalists to post or report information, including on their personal accounts, and to address contestation about information and news events between public and government in the name of guaranteeing the "people's right to know" (Fu and Lee 2016; Sæther 2008; Wang 2016). And just as journalists world-wide have increasingly adopted digital tools, platforms, and practices to extend their reporting and to use social media to find sources and distribute news (Hassid and Repnikova 2016), Chinese journalists' use of social media in reporting has become a norm in fast-paced newsrooms (Tong 2015). However, few studies examine how Chinese investigative journalists verify information obtained from online sources, whereas merely sourcing information online is not equal to conducting online verification.

To counter mis- and dis-information online, Chinese journalists have turned, with varied success, to citizen (or netizen) journalism in exploring aspects of "rumor verification" (Zeng, Burgess, and Bruns 2019), while also debating what constitutes "truth" and "fact" (Latham 2000; Maras and Nip 2015). Chinese journalists employ greater scrutiny when searching for sources and information online due to an increase of opinion-based, emotional messages that some users try to share as being factual (Li 2018). These journalists also see verification as a process synonymous with fact-checking (Polumbaum 2008; Tong 2017, 2015), because the practice of "verification" carries an assumption that journalists can access information freely in a democratic environment. Put simply, in Chinese journalism, checking facts is also the verification of truthfulness (Wang 2016). In this context, the importance of "fact" comes from the overarching principle in Chinese journalism of "seeking truth from facts" (Latham 2000). While the notion of "truth" may be a contested one under the regime of the Party, acknowledging the existence of multiple interpretations of "truth" is still substantially important in the conceptualization and use of facts within Chinese journalistic studies and practice (Maras and Nip 2015; Li 2018). Yet, little scholarship examines journalists' perceptions of how many "facts" must be investigated to lead to "the truth." Certainly, netizens have helped journalists identify sometimes-contradictory facts as a way to get closer to "the truth," yet this practice may not always comport to a professional journalistic verification process (Zeng, Burgess, and Bruns 2019).

Through on-ground verification, professional journalists in China confirm that sources being used are not overtly aligned with a single ideological position and that the reporting

processes of source information comport with journalistic standards of source-verification established by leading journalists to ensure a consistent means of information-gathering and delivery (Tong 2017). Such practices appear similar to that of "source criticism," a critical review of sources that appears most popular in Nordic countries (i.e., Handgaard, Simonsen, and Steensen 2013; Steensen 2019). Yet, as this study suggests, reporting in a digital age in China, one influenced heavily by fake and dis-information via social media, is also increasingly challenging for investigative journalists to verify information and to identify what they consider to be true and factual. Additionally, Chinese journalism scholars have also argued that the authenticity of online information may not be completely verified—or verifiable—by relying only on online tools (Zhang and Li 2019). In fact, online tools for journalistic verification in China are not yet well-developed, with many still in the start-up stage (Huang 2019).[3] Increased public interest in online fact-checking and verification, according to the participants in this study, is also contributing to a form of "information overload," however, as they already experience an onslaught of social media and digital channels each day. The concept of "information overload" is discussed next.

Information Overload: A Force Upon Journalistic Work

Interdisciplinary scholarship identifies trends of "information overload," a notion that describes the experience and behaviors of media users (and producers) when they are immersed in a vast pool of information (Savolainen 2007). When users (or makers, such as journalists) are faced with what they may consider to be "too much information," such as in the case of social media posts, blogs, search results, and sources, these individuals tend to distance themselves from the content to seek respite (Brennen 2019; Holton and Chyi 2012; Liang and Fu 2017). "Information overload" also contributes to media users seeking alternative venues for their information, conducting deeper analysis of issues they are trying to understand, and further verify the information that has overloaded them (Lee, Lindsey, and Kim 2017).

Research into "information overload" suggests that online users may not suffer from the deluge of information in the same ways as the news producer (Liang and Fu 2017). Audiences, always wanting more information and desiring to shape public-press discourse through online interactions with journalists, apply pressure to news workers by pushing to them user-made content and demanding journalistic content in response (Bossio and Holton 2019). And while news users tend to find that having greater trust in a news source reduces the likelihood of encountering "information overload" (Lee, Lindsey, and Kim 2017), journalists—including in China (Li 2018; Su 2019)—have expressed that the online environment, workplace demands, and other social and cultural pressures on their work has complicated their experiences in determining newsworthiness, the authenticity of sources, and audience desires and interests in news products (Kormelink and Meijer 2018; Larsen 2017). This study, therefore, provides an analysis of these investigative journalists' challenges and solutions to a sense of "information overload" in terms of verifying sources and source information offline in an age of heightened mis- and dis-information.

Methodology

This study relies on data collected from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 investigative journalists working in Beijing carried out between September 2017 and December 2017. These journalists were all based in in-depth reporting or investigative reporting departments of their news organizations and described themselves as covering issues of public importance in more extensive reports than that which appear in daily journalism and frequently focus on topics that the political elite may wish to remain uncovered—elements identified as central to Chinese investigative journalism (Tong 2011; Wang 2016). This time period happened to coincide with the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China when news organizations received information from the government instructing them to limit the amount of critical reporting during the event.[4] Yet, this research location was selected because Beijing has the greatest number of investigative journalists in China, accounting for 41 percent of those in the country (Zhang and Cao 2017).[5]

The first author, who is from Beijing, used snowball sampling to contact investigate journalists (see Table 1) for this project after working as an intern at an online media organization for six weeks. Fifteen of the journalists who participated in the study worked at newspapers, which also had various forms of online publications. Six journalists worked at weekly magazines, and four worked at online news organizations. The years of working experience among interviewees spanned from one to more than 20 years. All journalists covered a range of issues for their news organizations, including those that are political, economic, technological, environmental, social, civil, and legal. Three interviews were carried out via phone, and the rest were face-to-face. Interviews lasted from 40 to 120 min.

The interviews focused on questions about how participants use social media in investigative reporting. By analyzing these reasons, we take a closer look at how reporting practices via social media lead to offline verification activities, which complicates conventional (and often-Western) understandings of online journalistic practices as being focused on using social media and online tools for verifying information (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016).

Table 1. Investigative journalists appearing in this study.

Journalist Number	Years in Journalism	Current Outlet Type
Participant 2	2 years	Newspaper
Participant 5	1 year	Weekly Magazine
Participant 7	3 years	Online News
Participant 9	4 years	Newspaper
Participant 11	10+ years	Weekly Magazine
Participant 12	5 years	Weekly Magazine
Participant 13	4 years	Online News
Participant 14	4 years	Newspaper
Participant 16	10 years	Online News
Participant 17	3 years	Newspaper
Participant 18	10 years	Newspaper
Participant 19	10+ years	Newspaper
Participant 20	4 years	Newspaper
Participant 21	3 years	Newspaper
Participant 23	2 years	Newspaper
Participant 24	7 years	Weekly Magazine
Participant 25	9 years	Newspaper

All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of interviewees by the first author who speaks Chinese as a first language. Translations were discussed with a fellow Journalism Studies scholar fluent in Chinese and with this paper's second author, who is fluent in English, to discuss the translations and complexities of the language and its meanings, a process influenced by work in Translations Studies and applied elsewhere in Journalism Studies (i.e., Gutsche, Naranjo, and Martinez-Bustos 2015; Pym 2010; Robinson 2014).

The authors of this study met several times over the period of six months to discuss the major themes of interest that emerged from the interviews, specifically related to how journalists used social media in their reporting and sought verification offline. Through our discussions, we came to focus on the consistent discussions by participants about a sense of feeling overwhelmed by dis- and mis-information on social media, the rise of fake sources and opinion content. Translations related to these portions of the interviews were frequently revisited by the first author and confirmed by a colleague who speaks Chinese as a first language, which assisted in determining the use of language and meaning through a conceptual lens related to journalism in a non-Western context (Waisbord and Mellado 2014) and "information overload." The analysis below focuses on two main findings from this process.

Analysis and Discussion

In this section, we discuss the major findings from this study through the lens of "information overload" and its key elements of it being a subjective, online experience where the user questions the legitimacy and authority of the information causing the overload, moves away from those information sources, and seeks information elsewhere to confirm what they initially found. First, we explore how investigative journalists in Beijing face challenges of what they believe is causing overload—a massive growth of online users of social media channels. Second, we discuss how these journalists turn to offline practices to verify sources, increasingly because of their "information overload."

Social Media as Platform for Information Overload

Participants working across a variety of journalism outlets and with varied years of experience said that they are increasingly inundated with information on social media that they must explore and trudge through to find news. They said that they struggle with the mass publishing of users' opinions, dis-information, and mis-information that appears as news and that warrant additional reporting to verify what is valid for daily and investigative work, creating a sense of overwhelming interactions with information. Interviewees discussed how social media was once a strong tool for gaining information and sources (and may still be) but that they are now finding that their investigative journalism requires more legwork and on-the-ground reporting.

Experiencing More (and More) Information

Journalists were clear that the changing nature of digital journalism—including investigative journalism—includes an influence of time compression, where audiences demand an

immediacy of news that pressures journalists into speeding-up the reporting and verification processes (Lee, Lindsey, and Kim 2017). This pressure, combined with the multiple choices and channels of information online, has made some journalists feel as though they are being asked to produce more news despite a lack of valid (or verifiable) information. Participant 16, for example, an online journalist who has been in the industry for 10 years, said that as audiences are demanding *more information* rather than *an analysis* of information, investigative journalists are forced to balance the short-term and long-term reporting projects. Social media provides insights based on "hot-button issues formed by public opinion," Participant 16 said, but that even with all of the potential news stories that appear online, it becomes difficult "to balance" reporting on trending stories and doing investigations because of the pressures of time and audience interests. Despite these audience demands, journalists say they must first and foremost produce in-depth, original, and quality journalism—even when feeling overloaded—to meet professional norms and expectations (i.e., Le Masurier 2015).

Even sifting through social media to find stories that could be covered is mired in platforms that are becoming home to "fake" pieces of information, the journalists said. Participants reported that journalists are becoming slower at producing news, especially investigative journalism, because they need to spend so much time investing in what is fake or not, and that they often find themselves pursuing information that they later find out to be false. "As the core facts of news event are proved to be fake, it is meaningless to investigate in further," said Participant 18, and it is within the learning of information as being false or misleading after time spent online with a source or a piece of information that adds to a frustration, burnout, and feelings of distrust in online channels, participants said. Participant 5, who has been at a weekly newspaper for one year, said that journalists must make decisions on information credibility at the same time they conduct deeper interrogations of source credibility, a time-rich and sometimes draining experience. "So much information online, especially on some public accounts on Weibo, is not reliable," Participant 5 said, continuing:

> For me myself, I read something online, and I tell the editor. If the editor says the story is fine, then, I go to verify starting with contacting the person who posted the information online. If that person is one of the people involved in the event, I will ask him/her about what he/she said. If the person is not involved in the event … I will contact the person who put this source online originally.

Social and geographic distance between journalists and sources is an emerging area of study, particularly in terms of doing journalism online (Wintterlin 2020). While distance may be unavoidable—even on the internet, which is said to bring people closer together, these investigative journalists said that not being able to see or meet with an online source negatively influences their trust in the source's information. Participant 9, who has worked for four years as a newspaper investigative journalist, said that the process of verification via social media is sometimes futile. In one case, the journalist explained, an editor found what appeared to be an official document online that disciplined a local government official. The editor believed that the document was real because of its official seal, but after the article was published, the journalists said, "the local propaganda department said that this is fake news—no such person and no such document. What results the fake news, in fact, is the incongruity between journalist and editor."

While it is not uncommon for the Chinese government (and many other governments) to reject embarrassing information, even if accurate (Janeway 1999; Sullivan 2014), Participant 9 believed this instance of publishing a version of "fake news" was due to an editor simply believing online information because it looked real, not because of governmental influence. Balancing between determinations of "truth" and whether a news item and "fact" would pass government criticism is a constant struggle, made more complicated by massive amounts of information, dis-information, and mis-information online (Participant 12). Indeed, journalists who participated in this study indicated that it is the "raw" nature of information that appears on social media (Shapiro et al. 2013) which often appears sometimes out of context and sometimes absent of appropriate sourcing that challenges them to question and verify facts in more ways than ever before. This added level of critical thinking and navigation of social media is an added toolset needed by journalists, an adopted skill that expands their environment of information overload.

That said, investigative journalists in this study report that the promise of social media to provide access to stories and sources has become second nature, adopted as a journalistic norm and that only in the past few years have they become better at critically analyzing what appears online (Participant 7)."The internet breaks traditional media's monopoly on information-providing," said Participant 11, a magazine reporter with more than 10 years of experience. "Everyone has a say, and it is common that fake news appears." Yet, while online information channels have become important for the public to be more critical of what is and isn't professional journalism, the journalist said: "traditional media has to calm down to do verification and interview in-person. News reporting cannot be made in a short time."

Journalists said that while they cannot prevent the dissemination of mis- and dis-information online, they can attempt to provide an accurate interpretation with new and reliable evidence for the public to make judgement, though that requires distancing themselves from some online information sources and going offline to meet and verify information. Conducting investigative journalism solely with online information and attempts at verification, journalists said, would lead to poor reporting that undermines their news outlet's brand and reputation (see more, Bossio and Holton 2019). In this case, then, maintaining the professional identity of journalism, a brand's reputation, and the professional's identity as a solid journalist in an age of information overload adds to a desire to create closer social and geographic connections with sources. But, journalists said, they struggle sometimes to identify what sources are even legitimate enough to meet as they wade through all that is out there to find what may be true. This is especially challenging, they said, because of the inundation of opinion posts that are masked as "objective information," or even journalism.

An Inundation of Public Opinion

Investigative journalists said that while they still use social media to find sources and stories (i.e., Participant 18, Participant 20), what is appearing online is not only in greater quantities but rooted in opinion. Even breaking news events and disasters across China are increasingly becoming moments for online users there to post seemingly "depoliticized" comments and discussions (Jia 2019). However, these posts are often ripe with subtle political and opinion messages designed to influence others' opinions on the

event, the government's handling of it, and any related social issues (Su 2019). Journalists in this study said that they are frequently led to report certain stories based upon the amount of opinion in social media that represents a sense of what they referred to as "public opinion" on issues and events in the news. And while there may be nuggets of news within these posts, journalists seeking deeper meanings and explanations in news events struggle with how easily a news event can slip into a philosophical—or political—debate that slows the reporting process. "It is common nowadays that breaking news appeared online and it maybe just a tip of iceberg," said Participant 23, who has worked in the field for two years at a newspaper. An investigation may begin to lead to new ideas and leads, but easily leads journalists with information that is an interpretation of events, not facts. Participant 23 explained:

> The public starts to choose a side to support and address opinion which forms a trending topic. Then, the mainstream media engages in and investigates. Through the media's investigation, it is found out that the truth of an event is totally different from what it was like in the beginning.

While the process of deciphering opinion from fact is a common challenge for daily journalists as audiences have learned how to use professional services and methods to present fake, biased, and customized information as professional journalism (Jackson and Moloney 2016), journalists in this study said social media posts—and reposts—that carry these characteristics are increasingly interfering with their investigative work. Such symptoms of information overload also influence personal use of social media (Bossio and Holton 2019), as journalists facing overload distance themselves from the platforms that spread massive amounts of information that they may not trust. Reporters world-wide find that the stories they work on change and develop as the investigation progress. They find sources to be inaccurate or untruthful and run across new information that alters their reporting.

Some of journalists' heightened attention to source credibility, participants said, is learned from working on asking skeptical questions about governmental information and propaganda. As Participant 25, a nine-year newspaper veteran, said, "Aside from the well-known reason—the political control—I think the truth is hard to be known because people's minds are complicated," adding that the crowded social media field makes it hard to determine what news sources and topics found on social media are true, opinion-based, emotional, or intentionally misleading or wrong. To be clear, journalists said social media was a viable option for finding clues to trace more sources, but not for verification. Said Participant 17 who has three years of experience at a newspaper:

> Journalists can track the tip provided by social media users to find more informants. In terms of what is true or not, it is the journalists' job to cross-check with different informants, to get close to those people involved in the event. That's the journalists' responsibility.

Social media is still a place for news tips, Participant 17 said, but the monitoring of social media platforms in terms of *how* they release information and *what* information they release (i.e., Larsen 2017) is double-the-effort in keeping track of what sources are fake, misleading, or valuable to the reporting. In short, journalists said in a digital world, the people at the center of information posted online are still just as important to journalists as the information itself. This perspective is discussed next.

Enough (or Too Many?) Questionable Sources?

Generally, investigative journalists involved in this study identified challenges not only with verifying information online in an age of information overload but with understanding the legitimacy or truthfulness of the people posting the information. Participant 9, with four years of experience at a newspaper, said that through social media individuals can provide credible information with images or videos of protests and other news events. Yet, the journalist said, because of the degree that users are using social media to misrepresent information—and themselves—it has become important for journalists to validate the identity of the person who post information. "The credibility [a source who posts video or images] is high," due to the governmental access afforded one who records mass events, the journalist said, "but we still have to verify in person." In reporting stories associated with an image posted online, Participant 9 said, "We would find the person who post the original information and then find other different sources."

Here, again, journalists likened the difficulties of using social media to verify users to the challenges of fact-checking government propaganda (Participant 24): Much of the verification process is based upon what sources (and what types of sources) journalists trust and can easily lead to the scuttering of an investigation due to unreliable source information captured online (Participant 20), which forces the journalists to search again amid the overloaded social media channels in China. Participant 21, who has worked in journalism for three years at a newspaper, explained that while much coverage at their news organization is obtained from Weibo, "I don't like sourcing from public accounts on social media, because I think they are not reliable and (the content on public accounts) are subjective."

Participant 7, who has worked in journalism for three years at a news website, said wrong and misleading information appeared on social media about a tiger attack at a local zoo. The posted information was plagued with opinion, wrong information, and by sources who had no independent or verifiable information about the case. For this journalist, this scenario highlights the challenges of social media as space overloaded with opinions, problematic information, unverified facts, and even conspiracy that journalists are less likely to uncover if they cannot also verify and possibly meet the source herself. Furthermore, participant 16, an online journalist with 10 years of experience, said that mainstream news workers must do this added work to verify information in ways that distance themselves from fake journalists, sources of dis- and mis-information, and overt opinion. Journalists clarified that social media, best represented in the words of Participant 16, "is bound with different kinds of interest" and that "it does not need to carry out the social responsibility as we (journalists) do."

Below, we discuss a second major theme that emerged from participants—that offline verification remains for them the only valid way to find "the truth" from their sources.

Offline Verification as Journalistic Process

Offline verification, journalists for this study said, also provides a means by which to cope with feeling "overloaded" by social media channels, fake information, opinion, the vast amount of information online, the proliferation of fake profiles, and a general distrust in what they read on social media. This overload has reinforced Chinese investigative

journalists' dedication to a conventional form of verification: meeting face-to-face with sources. "Offline" verification, according to these journalists, is better than "sitting around the desk" (i.e., Participant 25). More importantly, from these interviews we argue that their offline verification practice is an epistemological act that allows journalists to observe facts and sources, assisting them in determining the truthfulness of the source and the information. Indeed, while investigative journalists may be less likely to embrace the internet due to the homogenization of content and the emotional expression of public opinion, according to this group of investigative journalists in Beijing, journalists are continuing to use online networks to find stories and sources—even if they consider social media content less-credible—and are increasing offline activities to verify information captured online.

Participant 20, for example, said that trending topics online are worthy of being investigated if the journalist suspects rumors around the topic will spread and in-depth investigation will result in a sense of truth and public calm. To do so, journalists said the "only" approach is to find a person—not an online profile—with whom to verify the information (i.e., Participant 9 and 16). Similarly, Participant 12, who has worked for five years in a weekly magazine, said that information needs to be critiqued by investigative journalists in-person and that journalists' "old networks" of sources work best to do so. Participant 16, a journalist for 10 years who is working in an online news outlet, seemed to agree, saying:

> The internet and Weibo are just tools for retrieving/obtaining information. It can provide us ways to find some hot topics, but what really matters is my friends, informants, deep throats, and also lawyers. Especially for scoop news, for instance, the downfall of a provincial official which is usually secretly announced, you cannot know that from Weibo, but friends can tell you.

Besides the inundation of information that journalists wade through online—and beyond the online means of information-sharing and gathering– journalists in this study said that they simply do not trust many of the sources posting information without seeing or meeting them. "I think that half of sources from social media are different from what the person said originally when we go to verify," said Participant 14, who has four years of experience in the field at a newspaper. The journalist continued, "Because when a person wants to report something to media, he will hide the disadvantages for himself, so you have to evaluate if the fact is possible to be checked."

Referring to the principle of "seeking truth from facts" (Latham 2000), which we discussed above, journalists in this study insist that facts mean that "something happened" and that these things, or the effects, are "observable." Participant 13 explained that part of her verification process includes observing a source's behavior and body movement to help make a judgment about what is "true." The journalist said, "It is impossible to fact-check every critical moment of an event or in a person's life, but what I observed regarding how the interviewee communicates and gets along with others, is close to the real thing (of a person)." What Participant 13 elsewhere in her interview calls *pangzheng*, or "circumstantial evidence," such as observed behavior of a source, is crucial to offline verification practices as online content—fake and otherwise—is "overloading" many journalists.

While mis-representation, inaccuracies, and even dis-information is a common trial for journalists globally (Deng 2018), journalists in this study said that they felt these issues

were increasing, evidenced by the amount of times that offline verification had proven online information wrong. At the time of the interview for this study, Participant 12, who has five years of experience and works at a weekly magazine, was covering the death of a Chinese university graduate who was the victim of a pyramid scheme. Much true and fake information related to the case appeared online, the journalist said, but journalists had recently found that one of the sources' online profiles was deleted by Chinese officials. Participant 12 then needed to go offline for information. "In our organization, two photojournalists and two journalists were sent out to investigate," the journalist said.

> They found out about the main facts very soon, and although what was found cannot contribute to knowing all of the truth of the event, we can make sure that what is published in the news are the facts we know.

Journalists said that an overloading of online information makes it impossible to verify every detail surrounding a news event or topic, but as Participant 12 explained, journalists must make decisions about which facts need confirming the most.

Related to the case mentioned at the introduction of this study, the suicide of Su Xiangmao, Participant 13 stressed the importance of investigating details of his suicide note offline, as online efforts only complicated the investigation. "After Su's death, his family only published a part of his suicide note online," the journalist said. "However, during my investigation, his family showed me the whole piece." Not only was the journalist able to gain more information for the case by meeting sources offline but was able to verify that the information in the note—and debated online—was credible.

These offline interviews do not come with their own emerging challenges. Journalists said that because so many of their colleagues have come to use social media to source information, they find themselves relying on veteran journalists to learn or to remember how to verify source credibility offline (Participant 12; Participant 16; Participant 19). "There is a kind of performance by the interviewee to alter their behavior and utterances to put themselves in the best light when interviewed," said Participant 13. "It is not easy for journalists to know what is performance if they do not spend enough time with the interviewees." In fact, participants said balancing information-gathering on social media with verification on the ground and by knowing the credibility of a source as much as the actual "truth" of the "facts" posted online is paramount for continued legitimacy of investigative journalists in Beijing in seeking "truth." By verifying the source offline, Participant 13 said, "I cannot say what I saw is 'truth,' but at least I know the real status of the interviewee."

Conclusion

This study analyzed interviews with 25 investigative journalists in Beijing to understand how they verify online information and sources in an age of "information overload." Journalists' comments suggest that they are increasingly challenged by the amounts of information—fake and real—on growing social media platforms, making their jobs harder as they spend more and more time deciphering what information is real. Their comments provide a more interesting finding—that because of difficulties finding the "truth" in information online and among sources, many who are either incorrect, misleading, or fake, these journalists remain more than ever committed to offline verification of sources and

their information while Western journalists turn to digital and online tools to do so. Moreover, this article illustrates how journalists orient verification with the principle of "seeking truth from facts" and that these facts are to be observable, or verified, by the journalist herself. For this study, "information overload" helps us understand that these journalists are not unable or unwilling to verify information online because of "overload." Rather that they were overloaded by the pressures and amount of online work and content today changed how they felt about the value of online verification and, in fact, reinforced for them that such a practice would not satisfy their cultural standards for finding "the truth" in investigative journalism. Therefore, these journalists are increasingly spending time dissecting increasing amount of online information and doing even more legwork. While we do not suggest these findings are generalizable beyond these investigative journalists in Beijing, we do wish to highlight that in their experience with "information overload" has bolstered their commitment to offline verification, an outcome which could be explored in other journalistic contexts and cultures.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the journalists who participated in this study; please note we take responsibility for the views shared. We also thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their suggestions that improved the submission.

Notes

1. The Cyberspace Administration of China is also known as the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission.
2. Participants mentioned microblogging, instant message applications, forums (BBS, bulletin board system), Weibo (Chinese Twitter), WeChat, Tianya, Baidu Tieba, and Zhihu (Chinese Quora). News aggregators also have public accounts on social media; these also have public accounts on social media where journalists find news and sources.
3. *Jiaozhen*, for instance, is fact-checking platform established by Tecent and is for the public to check rumors about social issues and science.
4. Despite this message of ideological control over the news, journalism scholarship discussed above suggests that Chinese journalists operate within degrees of editorial autonomy and certainly with greater agency than depicted in much Western journalism research about Chinese media.
5. While Chinese journalists faced economic pressures to reconfigure the organizational resources and increase the revenue or some newspapers decrease the financial support on investigative reporting this form of journalism remains throughout the society (Wang and Sparks 2019).

Disclosure Statement

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