THE PARTY LINE
HOW THE MEDIA DICTATES PUBLIC OPINION IN MODERN CHINA
DOUG YOUNG
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How the Media Dictates Public Opinion in Modern China

Doug Young

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I would like to dedicate this book to my parents, Bernard and Ellen Young, who have patiently put up with all my China fixations over the years.
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Imagine this: You wake up one morning, roll out of bed, and turn on your radio to hear the morning drive-to-work show as you get ready to go to the office. Mike, Harold, and Samantha are going through their usual banter when the news announcer breaks in: “This just in,” he says. “We’re getting word that Clinksburg Mayor Tom Whitfield has been arrested as an accessory to murder. There are no further details at this time, but we’ll be back with more on this breaking story when we have new information.”

The show returns to Mike, Harold, and Samantha, who instantly jump on this breaking story by cracking jokes about Whitfield, the mayor of Clinksburg, who was elected two years ago on a campaign of toughness on crime. You wonder how the very man you voted for could have been busted for such a serious offense, even though you’re not really sure what the crime actually is.

After dressing, you turn on your laptop and go to the Clinksburg Chronicle homepage. Sure enough, under the “breaking news” section is an article accompanied by an unrelated photo of Mayor Whitfield at a recent event. It offers several new details beyond the original bulletin without citing any sources. “Mayor Whitfield Arrested in Murder
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Cover-Up” reads the headline in bold, followed by the lead: “Clinksburg Mayor Tom Whitfield has been arrested and charged as an accessory to murder. The mayor was taken into custody this morning at his home in suburban Clinksburg.” You want to know more, but you really need to leave for work.

You pull out of your driveway and quickly tune to the local radio news station. You learn that Mayor Whitfield’s wife is the one actually accused of murder. The report adds that the mayor found out about the crime and tried to hide it, but again no further details are given.

You soon arrive at work, where the story is already the talk of the office. Everyone is generally as surprised as you are, but no one ever stops to question where the accusations are coming from, despite the lack of details and attributions. What’s more, the story so far has been devoid of images, with no news conferences, video, or photos of the mayor or his wife being led away in handcuffs, or anyone making statements. It’s all been text on the page and announcers stating facts with no sources.

You check the Chronicle and several other web sites throughout the morning for updates, and are also in regular touch with friends and close colleagues via e-mail and instant messaging to stay on top of the story. You have a few more details by lunchtime, but you’re no longer sure what is coming from where and how reliable the sources are. According to various reports you’ve received, the mayor’s wife fell out with one of her business associates, an unnamed Kenyan man, whom she is now suspected of having killed. There are still no names of accusers behind the allegations, but the Chronicle is now saying that Mayor Whitfield was believed to have known about the murder just a few days after it occurred but failed to go to the police.

Minor details trickle in through the rest of the day. Oddly enough, there are no comments from the mayor or any member of his staff, from the district attorney, or from anyone else, for that matter. After work, you skip the usual drink with your colleagues and drive straight home to catch the evening news on TV.

The mayor’s arrest is at the top of the broadcast, and by now the report is probably as close to complete as it’s going to get today. The announcer rehashes the details you’ve already heard, with yet another old photo of Whitfield. She says the mayor was arrested at about six-thirty this morning at his suburban home, and is being charged as an
accessory to murder. He reportedly learned about the crime committed by his wife a couple of days after the Kenyan man died in a mysterious auto accident. But he failed to go to the police for at least the next week, leading to his arrest this morning.

The whole story has a certain strangeness—not so much the actual facts, but the lack of attribution. You expected the usual multimedia circus, which should have included TV footage and photos of the mayor and possibly his wife being led away in handcuffs from their home, press conferences by his lawyer and the district attorney, and possibly even written statements from the family of the Kenyan man. Instead, all the reports and images have a kind of flatness to them.

The next morning, the newspapers mostly rehash accounts from the previous day. On your way to the kitchen you notice someone has slipped a manila envelope under your front door with the words “strictly confidential” written in heavy black marker on the front. Upon opening it, at the top left of the document inside you see “Official, Final Version,” and below that “For Immediate Release.” Then two lines down, at the center of the page, comes the headline: “Clinksburg Mayor Tom Whitfield Guilty of Murder Cover-Up.” As you read down the page you realize that the document you are now holding is the sole source of information for all the facts you heard yesterday, containing everything from the auto accident that killed the Kenyan man to the fact that the mayor knew about his wife’s involvement in the case for at least two weeks without going to the police. Nowhere on the sheet is there any indication of who is accusing the mayor, what evidence there is against him, where he is now, or how he or anyone else in the case has responded to the allegations. And yet, he was arrested anyway—and the media reported it all as if it were fact without noting any sources.

Welcome to news reporting as experienced in China. While the following story may sound strange, it closely mirrors a case that captivated much of China in the spring of 2012. That case saw a former Communist Party high-flier named Bo Xilai arrested for serious breach of discipline after his wife allegedly had a British business associate murdered when their relationship soured. No stories appeared in the Chinese media for several weeks after Bo’s disappearance from public view, despite widespread rumors. When the media finally reported on the matter, all stories came from a single source: the official Xinhua