



To what extent is self-censorship a kind of freedom? The case of China

Chiara Landi^a

^aSapienza University of Rome, Piazzale Aldo Moro 5, Rome 00185, Italy

Abstract

Nowadays it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore that the majority of people are unaware about the reliability of what they read in the press and what they listen to the radio. In fact, it is not easy to recognize when news has been manipulated by journalists or if it is presented in an ambiguous way to convey an altered idea. The mechanism that leads to this uncertainty is called self-censorship, and is one of the techniques used by most newsrooms around the world to try to avoid measures and censorship by political authorities. Consequently, one of the greatest current discussions in legal and moral philosophy is how much we should believe in what we read or in what we are informed by media every day. However, there has been little discussion about the concept of self-censorship; Hence, the aim of this article is to fill part of this knowledge gap, through an analysis of the Chinese typical case of self-censorship. Firstly, in order to answer this question, will be provided information about the background and will be defined the concept of self-censorship, pointing out the difference and the connection to censorship; Then, will be rated the current status of China self-censorship, and will be presented a survey to analyze the problem within the Chinese newsrooms. Finally, in order to form a judgment, will be summarized the result of the study about the conception and the aim of Chinese self-censorship.

© 2013 European Journal of Research on Education by IASSR.

Keywords: Self-censorship, journalism, China, censorship;

1. Introduction

The issue of self-censorship comes from a problem behind it, namely that of censorship, understood as a veto from a government authority. While a variety of definitions of the term censorship have been formulated over the years, this paper will use the definition first suggested by Horton (1993) who saw it as “The prohibition of public communication which may be considered inconvenient to people, determined by a government or other media authorities”.

Currently, various surveys and research have shown that in several areas, as shown in Figures 1, especially in Central and South Asia, there is a level of pervasive censorship on public and private life of citizens (Horton, 2011). It is this diffusion that can be considered the main cause of the birth and spread of self-censorship (Sparks and Tong, 2009).

Regarding this, Kis (2009) claims: “Self-censorship means reading your own text with the eyes of another person, a situation where you become your own judge, stricter and more suspicious than anyone else”. Indeed, it

might be argued that censorship and self-censorship are similar, but both of them are invisible and it is hard to delete them.

2. Self-censorship in China

Having discussed the general meaning of self-censorship, it is fundamental to focus on a case and see how journalists have tried to avoid political risks. The most representative example of the concept of self-censorship can be considered the case of China. The issue of censorship in China has very ancient origins, Steele (2011). Indeed, the first emperor of China, Huangdi, can be considered an early example of this practice in ancient times. In order to avoid posthumous historical criticism about his empire, he burned all the books and papers that were not related to practical matters closely. Although this is nothing but an ancient and extreme example of Chinese censorship (Steele, 2011), the practice of eliminating dangerous articles and books from the market in China has remained anchored in society and unfortunately still widespread. In China, freedom of the press is controlled by Article 35 of the State Constitution. However, the exercise of these rights is obviously limited by government policies, justifying that change with the need to protect state secrets and national security.

However, to return to the recent political situation, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), compared to its predecessors, is facing an unprecedented challenge. “The expansion of the print and broadcasting media, the emergence of market competition and the arrival of Internet have meant that information is much more readily available to the general population” (Liu, 2011). Hence, The CCP has to face a new era, which was totally far from the will of its predecessors; In fact, they were not prepared and decided to act with a strict and a restrictive manner.



Figure 1. Reporters Without Borders, 2013.

2.1. The issue of Chinese media

In this difficult context, the main concern of Chinese media is to avoid political risks. In order to do this, journalists decide to concentrate on how the news is framed and presented. There are two ways to control the frame of news: the first one consists of focusing on social problems that are behind the individual tragedies. In fact, it is safer for journalists to criticize a group of people or a social problem like the gap between poor and rich, rather than to focus on powerful individuals, Horton (2011); the second one is to evaluate and modify the article in order to delete some political problems. This paragraph has shown that in China there are two main ways to apply self-censorship: the editing process and the presentation of the news. However, it is appropriate to understand how and in which way these techniques are applied by different Chinese newsrooms.

3. Survey on Chinese newsrooms

In order to respond more accurately to the question “To what extent is self-censorship a kind of freedom” it may be necessary to present a survey carried out by Tong, a famous researcher and expert in this field, in 2009. He sent three different reports of three social problems, by taking into consideration the issue of how the Chinese newsrooms change the content of original reports thanks to the tool of self-censorship; In fact, this survey lends support to the view that there are different techniques to edit a news article and apply self-censorship. The first newsroom of the survey is the *Dahe Daily*, a commercial Conservative newspaper; the second one is *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, a famous investigative newspaper of Liberal ideas. The sent reports concerned serious episodes that had occurred in China including the death of two people with the involvement of the police, which led to violent demonstrations and the subsequent arrest of hundreds of protesters. Moreover, the *Dahe Daily* decided to delete the part of the original report dedicated to the reasons behind the riots, that the journalist used to analyze the social situation. In fact, in the original report there was a paragraph about this issues: “... In the process of the investigation, the journalist heard the civilian version of explanations for the riot. People believed the increasing number of laid-off workers and the accumulating conflicts between people and government were the main reasons for the riot ... According to the government, building the plaza was a business development activity, but the government used the police to forced out residents and business people..”; This part of the original report was deleted in the published article. Through linguistic analysis and sociological techniques, the author highlights some similarities and some significant differences on the behavior of the two newsrooms. In fact, both of them have an apprehension for political risks and try to covert the interest for social problems of the report. In order to do this, they attempt to switch the tone of the report by constructing a positive political stance. However, in order to ensure this, the two newsrooms use two different procedures. The Liberal newsroom, the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, uses discursive strategies such as changing a few words or using synonyms, maintaining the same themes. For instance, while the original report uses the expression "Officials", the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* uses the word "Government staff". This was the original report: “ On the other side, the *Dahe Daily*, utilizes directly the cancellation of the problematic issues. In fact, the survey showed that whole section related to the intervention of the police against the demonstrators have been deleted (Tong, 2009).

How we have understood from this section, both newsrooms use self-censorship, but in different ways. The Liberal one tries to remain faithful to the themes of the original report, but uses some techniques of self-censorship to maintain the informational purposes of the article. Whereas, the Conservative one, uses self-censorship in its completely negative meaning by deleting insecure topic.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has investigated the value of self-censorship in China and how it affects the professionalism of the newsrooms that use it. Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this status, to what

extent is self-censorship a kind of freedom, is now possible to state that self-censorship can be considered as a mistake when the result is the decision of do not publish articles in order to avoid political reactions; on the contrary, when it is used as a method to avoid censorship but to maintain the informational purpose it can be considered in a positive way. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the issue of censorship is widespread throughout the world, but has higher incidence in some areas such as China. As the survey showed, in China the instrument of self-censorship was more efficient than the direct orders from the authorities. The fine line between news and authorized taboo is not clear and is constantly changing, leading journalists to practice self-censorship to avoid exceeding this boundary and attracting unwanted controls. Regarding to this, the survey presented has finally shown that self-censorship can be successfully viewed in ambivalent terms from both the point of view of journalists and that of the reader. However, in some newsrooms, such as Liberal newsrooms, it is evident that it can bring substantial benefits like the ability to publish content that would otherwise be erased. Hence, self-censorship becomes an efficient way to connect journalists, readers and governments and can therefore minimize the political risks. However, the most important limitations of this study lies in the fact that a limited number of newsrooms in China has been examined and it is therefore necessary to provide further details to understand the problem at hand; further work should be done in order to establish the journalists' awareness of the instrument of self-censorship that they decide or are forced to use.

References

- Cambridge Dictionary (2009). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Horton, J (1993). Liberalism, multiculturalism and toleration. London: Macmillan
- Horton, J (2011). *Self-censorship*. Res Publica, 17, 91-106.
- Kis, D (1986). *Censorship/Self Censorship*. Index on Censorship 15, 43-45.
- Liu, S (2011). *Structuration of Information Control in China*. Cultural Sociology September 5, 323-339.
- Sparks, C and Tong, J (2009). *Investigative Journalism in China today*. Journalism studies 10, 337-352.
- Steele, P (2009). *Censorship*. London: Evans brothers.
- Tong, J (2009). *Press self-censorship in China: a case study in the transformation of discourse*. Discourse & Society 20, 593-612.
- Zhao, Y (1998). *Media, market, and democracy in China: between the party line and the bottom line*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press