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Navigating the AI Hype: Chinese Journalists' Algorithmic Imaginaries and Role Perceptions in Reporting Emerging Technologies

Joanne Kuai

Department of Geography, Media and Communication, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This study explores how Chinese journalists perceive, use, and report on artificial intelligence (AI) amid the global discourse of AI hype. Drawing on qualitative analysis of 18 in-depth interviews with journalists from a range of Chinese news organisations, this research examines (1) journalists' algorithmic imaginaries and their role in shaping AI narratives, (2) perceptions of AI hype and strategies for responsible reporting, and (3) the journalistic roles reflected. The findings show that journalists predominantly frame AI as a pragmatic tool for enhancing newsroom efficiency, while also acknowledging its broader societal significance. Although aware of speculative discourses, they reject the label of "media hype," portraying their coverage as balanced, event-driven, and aligned with public interest. Situated within China's distinctive political and media environment, this study highlights the complexities of journalistic practice in the algorithmic age and calls for a contextualised theorisation of media hype and AI's discursive construction in non-Western settings.

KEYWORDS

Artificial intelligence; Chinese media; generative AI; journalistic role performance; media hype; media innovation; professional roles; sociotechnical imaginaries

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative technology with far-reaching implications across multiple domains of society (Crawford 2021). As AI technologies continue to advance, it becomes increasingly important for the public to develop a nuanced understanding of their societal, ethical, and political ramifications (Broussard 2018). Journalists serve a vital role in this process by translating complex technical development into accessible narratives, thereby bridging the gap between experts and the broader public (Diakopoulos 2019). However, in the context of growing discourse and speculation surrounding AI (Markelius et al. 2024), the need for responsible, critical reporting becomes ever more pressing. Such reporting is essential to ensure

CONTACT Joanne Kuai joanne.kuai@kau.se Department of Geography, Media and Communication, Karlstad University, Universitetsgatan 2, 651 88 Karlstad, Sweden.

that the trajectory of AI remains aligned with societal values and public interests (Diakopoulos 2015).

AI, like many other transformative technologies, involves a complex network of actors, including the state, scientists, policymakers, industry leaders, journalists, and the public (Crawford 2021). The lens through which journalists perceive AI—and their role in reporting on it—is crucial, as it shapes the narratives and frameworks through which the public understands this evolving technology (Bucher 2017; Ji et al. 2024). While a growing body of research has explored journalistic engagement with AI in the Western context (Jones et al. 2022; Diakopoulos 2019), there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the Chinese media landscape. Examining the Chinese context is particularly important given the country's distinctive political system, state-media relations, and AI governance model, all of which influence how AI is developed, deployed and communicated to the public (Zeng 2022). As China positions itself as a global alternative to liberal democracies and embraces AI as a strategic resource (Zeng 2022), understanding how the media navigates and shapes AI discourse becomes essential—not only for domestic insight but also for assessing broader geopolitical and normative implications.

In China, the rapid development and widespread integration of AI technologies have significantly reshaped everyday life. Domestically developed tools—such as DeepSeek, Baidu's Ernie Bot, Moonshot AI's Kimi, and ByteDance's Doubao—have become embedded in users' routines, offering functionalities comparable to OpenAI's ChatGPT. This ecosystem of homegrown AI tools has emerged in part due to restricted access to Western platforms and regulatory restrictions on foreign ownership, aligning closely with China's national AI strategy and investment in indigenous infrastructure (Luo 2022; Zeng 2022). In 2017, the Chinese State Council (2017) outlined a comprehensive strategy for AI development, positioning AI as essential to national development and global competitiveness. Within this context, journalists are expected to support the state's strategic vision while simultaneously fulfilling their role as watchdogs—promoting transparency, ensuring accountability, and encouraging informed public debate on the ethical, economic, political, and social dimensions of AI (Ji et al. 2024; Zeng et al. 2020). It is therefore essential to examine the strategies Chinese journalists employ to balance advocating for technological advancement while critically reporting on AI and the platform companies driving its development and adoption.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 18 journalists from a range of Chinese media organisations, this qualitative study examines: (1) the algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher 2017) of Chinese journalists and their generative role in moulding the future of AI, (2) how journalists navigate the discourse surrounding AI hype (Markelius et al. 2024) and their role in the discursive construction of AI (Vrabič Dežman 2024), and (3) how these dynamics intersect with journalists' role performance (Mellado 2015) and the evolving discursive constitution of journalism in China. Given the socially constructed and interpretive nature of these themes, a qualitative approach is particularly suited to capturing the layered perspectives, interpretative frameworks, and contextual factors that shape journalists' engagement with emergent technologies. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Chinese journalists rise to the challenge of covering AI in a way that allows for an informed debate over ethics, economics, politics, and the future of AI, while navigating the complex interplay between the national interests, private enterprise, and journalistic practice in the algorithmic age.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Journalists' algorithmic imaginaries—that is, how they envision and interpret AI—play a crucial role in shaping their perceptions of AI-related hype. These interpretations, in turn, impact how journalists help the public navigate the broader AI discourse and reflect the broader professional role of journalists in the Chinese context.

Algorithmic Imaginaries in Journalistic Construction

In recent years, the proliferation of AI systems and algorithms has had a profound impact on multiple domains of society, including journalism (Diakopoulos 2019; Kuai et al. 2023). As algorithms increasingly shape news production and dissemination, and AI itself increasingly becomes a subject of journalistic inquiry, it is essential to understand how journalists experience, interpret, and engage with these technological developments. This study approaches the phenomenon through the lens of *algorithmic imaginaries* (Bucher 2017), a concept that helps illuminate journalists' perceptions and interactions with AI systems. Bucher (2017, p. 31) defines algorithmic imaginaries as "the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms." Rooted in Science and Technology Studies (STS), this concept emphasises that while technologies no doubt possess material attributes, they also come to embody meanings constructed through individual and collective practices, discourses surrounding the technologies and their historical precedents, and the broader mythologies evolve around them over time.

Algorithmic imaginaries can be understood as a more specific articulation of the broader concept of *sociotechnical imaginaries*, which refer to "collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfilment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects" (Jasanoff and Kim 2009, p. 75). In the context of China's stated ambition to become a global AI superpower by 2030, these imaginaries contribute to the coproduction of both the future of AI future and what Suchman (2023) terms the *thingness* of AI. Similar to the notion of *nuclearity* (Hecht 2012), this thingness of AI "is not so much an essential property of things as it is a property *distributed among* things" (Hecht 2012, p. 14, emphasis in original). Understanding this technopolitical phenomenon requires attention to the spatial and temporal variations (Hecht 2012), as well as to the roles both human and non-human actors and the important sites of politics (Duez and Bellanova 2012). This analytical lens enables a macro-level exploration of the mutual shaping of technology, media, politics, and society.

A growing body of research has examined journalists' perceptions and experiences with AI systems and algorithms. When discussing the challenges BBC journalists face in understanding and engaging with AI and algorithmic systems in news production, Jones et al. (2022) highlight a disconnect between the pervasive use of AI and journalists' understanding of it, which often relies on guesswork. The authors suggest that such a gap may limit the journalists' ability to use and report on AI responsibly and recommend strategies to improve AI literacy at individual, organisational, and community levels. In a comparative study between journalists from China and the United States, Jia et al. (2024) found that practitioners in both contexts viewed

automated journalism to be helpful in augmenting news reporting and regarded experimentation with AI systems as part of a broader strategy to future-proof their organisations. Complementing these findings, Yu and Huang (2021) highlighted the adaptability and resilience of Chinese journalists in responding to the challenges posed by AI, as well as the supportive stance of media organisations toward technological innovation.

In examining how AI, automation, and algorithms are treated as subjects of journalistic reporting, Wang et al. (2023) compared sociotechnical imaginaries of AI in the UK, Chinese and Indian media. They did so through the frame of four utopian/dystopian dichotomies (Cave and Dihal 2019), namely "immortality" versus "inhumanity," "ease" versus "obsolescence," "gratification" versus "alienation," and "dominance" versus "uprising". They found that where UK media expressed a higher degree of "AI anxiety", Chinese and Indian media more frequently framed AI as a source of economic opportunity (Wang et al. 2023). In the Chinese context, Ji et al. (2024) examined critical reporting on AI and algorithms, revealing that journalists' algorithmic imaginaries often reflect and reinforce state objectives. While journalists do raise concerns about the computational powers these AI systems impose and the potential harms they exert, such critiques are typically directed toward platform companies, whereas the state is depicted as a benevolent and responsible custodian of technological development (Ji et al. 2024).

Journalists' experiences with and interpretations of algorithms and AI can influence their reporting and thus significantly affect public trust, understanding, and acceptance. This study focuses on both algorithms and AI, paying particular attention to how journalists interpret and engage with them in their professional practice. By examining the generative role of journalists' algorithmic imaginaries and, more broadly, their sociotechnical imaginaries, this research seeks to identify potential biases, assumptions, or blind spots that may influence not only media narratives but also the future design and governance of algorithms and AI systems (Deuze and Beckett 2022). Accordingly, the first research question asks:

> RQ1: What are the main themes that emerge in Chinese journalists' interpretations of algorithms and AI, and how do these themes reflect and reconstruct algorithmic and sociotechnical imaginaries?

When Media Hype Meets AI Hype

The notion of AI as a transformative technology has become a prevailing narrative. However, this narrative is increasingly accompanied by concerns over excessive hype, where exaggerated claims and unrealistic expectations obscure the actual capabilities and limitations of AI technologies (LaGrandeur 2024). The public release of ChatGPT by OpenAI in 2022 marked a new wave of AI accessibility and visibility, sparking renewed debate over the balance between genuine innovation and speculative or inflated promises (Markelius et al. 2024). This phenomenon, widely referred to as *AI hype*, has been described as "a trending global fixation and prioritisation of AI-related technologies, ideas and investments" (Markelius et al. 2024, p. 1). Markelius et al. (2024) identify four sociotechnical mechanisms that drive the AI hype: (1) anthropomorphism, meaning attributing human characteristics to nonhuman entities; (2) the

proliferation of self-proclaimed AI experts and their exaggerated technical literacy; (3) the fear of missing out (FOMO) present in the industry, academia, media and geopolitical spheres, often expressed through techno-determinist rhetoric; and (4) the overuse and misuse of the term *AI* in public and institutional discourse.

As previously discussed, journalists' algorithmic imaginaries—and, by extension, sociotechnical imaginaries—shape how they perceive AI-related hype and how they assist the public in navigating it. As pointed out by Borup et al. (2006), the presence of hype surrounding scientific and technological innovations is inseparable from the expectations that shape and are shaped by it. Hype, thus, not only reflects our expectations of the existing sociotechnical realities but also shapes what people think about how the sociotechnical systems could or should work and their capacity to reshape them (Ananny and Karr 2025). In this context, Suchman (2023, p. 1), reminds us that "the thingness of AI, as its status as a stable and agential entity, needs to be made controversial". AI should not be treated as a self-evident or fixed object, but rather as a contested and constructed entity. Expanding on this view, Bourne (2024, p. 10) contends that "an entire AI value chain is being constructed across investment markets, consumer markets and state circles by a powerful global tech sector that has largely captured the infrastructure of contemporary media and promotional culture, as well as influential state mechanism." She underscores the need for greater transparency around the opaque knowledge apparatus that underpins how value is ascribed to AI technologies.

Highlighting the role of media in constructing and sustaining hype, scholars have conceptualised *media hype* as "a special kind of news wave created by the self-reinforcing processes in the news production" (Vasterman 2005, p. 527). As Vasterman (2005) emphasises, media hype is not merely a matter of exaggeration and distortion; rather, it involves a process of amplification and magnification through repetitive and escalating coverage. For a news event to evolve into media hype, it typically requires an initial trigger that meets standard news value, along with a perceived violation of societal norms that can sustain a public debate and allow for multiple perspectives to be represented (Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær 2009). This framework is particularly salient in the context of emerging technologies such as AI, where the gap between anticipated potential and actual developments often generates inflated expectations and misperceptions. In this environment, the role of journalists becomes especially important, as they are not only reporting on AI but also actively shaping public discourse and understanding through their editorial choices and narrative frames.

Journalists, in recognising the transformative potential of AI, may be inclined to foreground its disruptive and innovative capacities in their reporting. However, this narrative can contribute to unrealistic expectations and widespread misconceptions about the actual capabilities of current AI systems (Bunz and Braghieri 2022). Furthermore, media representations of AI are often shaped by a range of external factors, such as the competitive dynamics of the media industry (Bourne 2024), political orientations (Shaikh and Moran 2024), and alignment with state priorities (van Noort 2024). These influences can give rise to exaggerated portrayals of AI's capabilities or the endorsement of speculative claims, thereby reinforcing the phenomenon of AI hype (Brennen et al. 2022). It is important to note, however, that not all journalists contribute to this trend. Some actively strive to deliver accurate, balanced and nuanced reporting that addresses

both the promises and limitations of AI technologies (Nguyen and Hekman 2024). Nonetheless, the impact of hype-driven journalism cannot be ignored, as it can shape public perception and influence the trajectory of AI development and adoption. In light of this, the second research question asks:

> RQ2: How do Chinese journalists perceive and navigate the discourse surrounding AI hype? What strategies do they employ to maintain responsible and balanced reporting?

Journalistic Roles in the Chinese Context

Underpinning the journalists' perception of AI and the strategies they deploy when reporting AI or any other topic is their understanding of journalism's functions and journalists' role in it. Over the years, journalism scholars have built a substantial body of literature exploring the evolution of professional values and norms, and how these principles align with—or differ from—actual practice. As journalistic roles play a crucial role in shaping the media landscape and influencing public opinion, understanding these roles is essential for comprehending the dynamics of journalism in any given context. Journalistic roles refer to how journalists perceive, articulate, and enact expectations about journalism's societal function (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). These roles are discursively constituted and negotiated within a relational structure, encompassing normative and cognitive orientations, as well as practised and narrated performance (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017).

Recent research has expanded the understanding of journalistic roles beyond the traditional focus on democracy and politics, recognising their importance in political and everyday life (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). In the political domain, 18 roles addressing six essential needs have been identified, while in everyday life, roles relate to consumption, identity, and emotion (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Emphasising the operationalisation of these professional roles and their manifestation in journalistic outputs, Mellado (2015) introduces the six roles that journalists may perform: (1) the *disseminator-interventionist*, providing information and engages in advocacy; (2) the *watchdog*, monitoring and holding power accountable; (3) the *loyal-facilitator*, supporting specific groups or causes; (4) the *service*, focusing on serving the public's needs; (5) the *infotainment*, blending information with entertainment to engage audiences; (6) the *civic*, promoting public participation and informed citizenship. These roles can coexist dynamically, reflecting tensions between journalism's normative ideals and its contextualised practices (Mellado 2015).

In the Chinese context, journalistic roles take on a unique form due to the country's political and cultural environment. This state-driven approach to journalism significantly influences the roles and responsibilities of journalists in China. Research on journalistic roles in China reveals a complex landscape shaped by political, economic, and technological factors (Wang 2023). Chinese journalists navigate a delicate balance between watchdog and loyal facilitator roles, critically examining algorithmic systems while portraying the state as a responsible steward of technological development (Ji et al. 2024). Investigative journalism has shifted from criticism to constructiveness under pressures of technological disruption, economic downturn, and tightened political control (Wang and Li 2024). Despite these challenges, Chinese journalists still maintain

a public service ideal, with advocacy motivation associated with higher news efficacy and lower news avoidance (Yu and Wang 2024). These dynamics highlight the intricate nature of journalistic role performance in China's authoritarian context and its evolution in the digital age.

AI and media hype critical areas of inquiry for understanding the complexities of journalism in China, as China's AI development involves an array of actors and taps into the shifting dynamics between national strategies, corporate interests, and the normative expectations of journalism (Ji et al. 2024; Zeng et al. 2020). Journalistic role performance is closely linked to the way media hype—such as that surrounding AI—is constructed and communicated. For instance, the *loyal-facilitator* role may uncritically amplify AI's promises to align with institutional agendas, while the *watchdog* role applies critical scrutiny to threats such as bias or displacement, counterbalancing hype. Meanwhile, the *infotainment* role may contribute to hype by sensationalising breakthroughs or doomsday scenarios to drive engagement, whereas the *civic* role fosters public deliberation to temper simplistic narratives. These dynamics reflect tensions between journalism's normative ideals (e.g., accountability, public service) and contextual pressures (e.g., institutional alignment, audience demands), ultimately shaping whether hype is legitimised, contested, or dramatised (Mellado 2015; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Hence, the third and final research question asks:

> RQ3: How do Chinese journalists perceive their role in relation to AI reporting? What journalistic roles are reflected in their perception and reporting strategies?

Method and Data

In line with the research questions, this study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews and a thematic analytical approach to investigate the Chinese journalists' algorithmic imaginaries, their strategies for navigating the AI hype, and the journalistic role reflected in these processes. The choice of qualitative methods was informed by the need to capture the nuanced, context-dependent experiences of journalists, which are often shaped by the unique political, social, and technological environments in China (Yu and Huang 2021). Semi-structured interviews were selected for their ability to facilitate rich, in-depth engagement with individual perspectives, while also allowing flexibility to explore emergent themes during the interview process (Creswell and Creswell 2017). Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Ethical Review Board at Karlstad University (Reference Number: HS 2024/150).

Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants representing a range of media organisations in China. The final sample consisted of 18 journalists working across different beats, producing various types of main journalistic outputs. Participants represented a mix of institutional levels (including one freelancer), and were based in various geographical locations, ensuring the inclusion of multiple organisational contexts within the Chinese media landscape (see Table 1). This range was intended to capture the organisational contexts and constraints that shape journalistic practices in China. While some interviewees were from traditional media

Table 1. List of interviewees from various media organisations.

Code	Media Organisation	Key Beat	Format[a]
1a	National News Agency	General	Video
1b	National New Media	General	Video
1c	National TV New Media	General	Video
1d	National News Agency Local Branch	General	Video
1e	National TV in English	Technology	Video
1f	National TV in English	General	Video
1g	National TV Legal Channel	Legal	Video
1h	National TV Financial Channel	Finance	Video
2a	Provincial Newspaper	Education	Text
2b	Provincial Newspaper	Culture	Text
2c	Provincial New Media	International	Text
2d	Provincial TV	Business	Video
2e	Provincial Radio	General	Audio
3a	Municipal Newspaper	General	Text
3b	Municipal Newspaper	Education	Text
4a	Private Technology New Media	Technology	Text
4b	Private Financial Magazine	Finance	Text
5a	Freelance	General	Text

Note. $N = 18$.
[a]Format here represents the primary format of the journalists' output, but interviewees sometimes also worked across platforms and produce multimodal content.

outlets, these organisations were also increasingly integrating digital platforms and new media technologies. As such, participants reported engagement in both traditional and digital media practices, reflecting the broader trend of media convergence in China (Wang 2023). As a part of a wider research project on AI in Chinese newsrooms, additional interviews were conducted with technologists in journalism innovation, newsroom management, and researchers at media and AI research institutes. Because the current paper focuses on journalistic roles, those materials were excluded from the present analysis. Nevertheless, they contributed to the author's broader contextual understanding. All names and affiliations of the interviewees were anonymised in accordance with participants' requests.

Data Collection

Data were collected by the author through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between February and September 2024. The interviews were conducted either in person or *via* phone, depending on the participant's location and preference. Each interview lasted between 40 to 90 min, allowing sufficient time to delve into the topics of interest while being mindful of the participants' time constraints. An interview protocol (see Table 2) was developed prior to data collection and used during the interviews to ensure the reliability of the study and maintain focus on the research topic (Yin 2018). The questions were designed to align with the study's research questions, addressing key themes relevant to the participants' experiences, interpretations and practices. Broad, open-ended questions aimed to uncover underlying assumptions and knowledge gaps, while more targeted prompts elicited explicit perceptions. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into topics that emerged during the conversation, thus enriching the depth and contextual relevance of the data. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and recorded with the interviewees' informed consent.

Table 2. Questions in the interview protocol.

Question Order	Questions	Related RQ(s)
1	What is your name, your age and your position at your organisation?	Opening question
2	For how long have you been working in journalism? What is your professional background?	Opening question
3	What are your job responsibilities? Can you describe a typical day of your daily work routine or typical work flow if it varies each day?	Opening question
4	How do you define 'artificial intelligence'? How do you define 'algorithm'?	RQ1
5	Can you give me some examples of AI-powered technologies and tools?	RQ1
6	What AI technologies have you encountered at work and in your life?	RQ1
7	Have you dealt with reporting on AI or relevant technologies? What was the process?	RQ2
8	What are the key issues to discuss when covering topics related to AI?	RQ2
9	Have you encountered any difficulties when covering AI? What are those if any?	RQ2
10	Do you think there is hype around AI? Why is that?	RQ2
11	How do you see your role as a journalist in relation to reporting of AI?	RQ3
12	Are you aware of any national or local policies when it comes to AI development? How do you position your role as a journalist in relation to that?	RQ3
13	Does your organisation encourage the use of AI or reporting of AI? What are your institution's views and visions about AI in your opinion?	RQ2 &3
14	Does your organisation provide training for learning about AI either for use or reporting? What kind of training would you like?	RQ2 &3
15	Does your organisation have any guidelines when it comes to using and reporting AI? What does the guideline cover? What do you think the guideline should cover?	RQ2 &3
16	What questions did I not ask that you think I should have asked? Is there anything you would like to add?	Closing question

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed by a speech-to-text service Amberscript B.V., a platform approved and provided by Karlstad University. The transcripts were subsequently imported into NVivo for qualitative data analysis. Drawing on an abductive approach to case study (Dubois and Gadde 2002) and thematic analytical method (Braun and Clarke 2006), three stages of coding were carried out. The primary cycle ensured all data were read closely and coded line by line using descriptive codes. The secondary cycle was used to organise, synthesise, and categorise codes to generate more interpretive codes, using an abductive approach to travel back and forth between the empirical data and theoretical framework (Dubois and Gadde 2002). The third cycle, utilising axial coding, ensured that smaller codes were categorised into larger categories based on re-emerging patterns and were honed into three themes that corresponded to the research questions. Selected excerpts from the interview transcripts were translated into English by the author to serve as supporting evidence in the research articles. These excerpts were edited for clarity while preserving the original intent and meaning expressed by participants.

Findings and Analysis

The following sections present the key findings in the order of the research questions. Overall, the analysis revealed three main insights: (1) interviewees regarded AI as a practical tool in news production, while also acknowledging its broader transformative potential in society, (2) interviewees believed that the current discussion of AI was

not a hype, and that the news media remained critical in reporting emerging technologies, (3) the *service*, *civic* and *loyal-facilitator* roles were most present, with interviewees expressing desired alignment with China's national strategies in promoting AI development.

From Everyday Tool to Revolutionary Force

RQ1 addressed the journalists' algorithmic and sociotechnical imaginaries. A central theme that emerged was the way in which the recent rise of generative AI (GenAI) had captured the imaginaries of the interviewees. Interviewees frequently equated AI with GenAI and its applications, such as ChatGPT, Sora, Baidu Ernie, and Kimi. Interviewees, working in technology and business reporting tended to focus more on AI's technological and industrial development. In other cases, interviewees described organisational efforts to promote experimentation with AI tools, including the provision of training seminars to support this exploration. Reported use cases included generating interview questions, brainstorming story titles, creating AI news anchors, and producing images based on textual prompts. Interviewee 1b described this uptake of AI as, at times, driven by top-down mechanisms within the organisation:

> Ever since ChatGPT blew up, the leadership in my organisation has taken AI very seriously top down. They encourage everyone to learn more about AI and say that AI will impact our future development. They say that first, we must closely follow AI development. Second, it's to learn how to use AI. There are attempts to use AI in news and program production. But so far, they are mainly experimental and somewhat superficial. (1b)

Interviewees expressed that the primary goal for adopting AI tools in the news value chain was to reduce cost and increase efficiency. In discussions of practical use cases, interviewees consistently framed AI as a tool that supports—but does not replace—human involvement in journalistic production. Across different organisational contexts, they also identified limitations to AI's application in journalism:

> My colleagues and I have tested different prompts, and most outputs read like bullshit. Maybe it's because we used a free version of the app… The AI outputs read very much like machine-generated ones that one can spot right away. I would rather write it myself than spend time editing the text. (3b)

> As for creative or innovative work, I personally think that AI can currently replace only some of the more basic tasks, like appearing on camera. However, the big condition for this is that the script has to be written by me—I have AI replace me in recording the video, but the script must be mine. If AI could write the script as well, that would be great. It would make my work easier, and I'd be happier. So right now, I'm not worried about the tasks that can be replaced. If I can be replaced, it just means that my value isn't sufficient. (1h)

> For example, in our industry, I don't necessarily need to understand the significance of the algorithms behind AI. That's true, but I definitely need to be able to use it. If there are 100 AI tools available, I think we should be able to use all 100 of them. (1a)

Interviewees expressed concerns about the data they fed into the AI tools, particularly regarding risks of data breaches and privacy violations. They also highlighted apprehensions about copyright disputes, both in relation to the data used to train AI models and the content generated by these systems. Interviewees described both

the presence and absence of organisational guidelines on the use of AI in journalistic practice, reflecting differing levels of institutional regulation. Nevertheless, interviewees demonstrated awareness of potential risks and discussed various coping mechanisms in response:

> One main challenge is that the AI tools often hallucinate. They'd make up facts in a super convincing way. I have to double-check everything they say, and it is very time-consuming. (1e)

> I'd clearly label contents generated with AI. I find AI bots lie, and they make up stories. I have to put a disclaimer so that I assume no responsibility. (2e)

> For example, we have a three-level review and proofreading mechanism. So, if an entire news piece is produced by AI, who would be held accountable for it? It's intangible and difficult to assign responsibility, so we would generally avoid this situation. Chinese media has this mindset of only wanting to spread the correct information, so we would still place the responsibility on humans rather than on AI. (1d)

Interviewees identified various constraints when engaging with AI, including limited financial and organisational resources, which they described as contributing to slow progress in adopting AI technologies in news production. They also described learning about AI through their reporting, particularly in areas such as automobile, finance, and cultural industries. When discussing AI more broadly—as a concept or societal phenomenon rather than a day-to-day tool—interviewees emphasised the technology's transformative capacity. Some characterised the current era of AI as marking a new industrial revolution, comparable to earlier shifts driven by the steam engine, electricity, and the Internet.

> I think all advancements in productivity are similar to the steam era—in my personal opinion, AI is a new iteration of productivity. It will certainly bring some concerns, such as the worry that AI will replace human jobs. However, as long as productivity continues to improve and society's production efficiency increases, the benefits provided to society as a whole will also increase, giving everyone more freedom. I'm personally quite optimistic about this. (1d)

> When something becomes commonplace, people no longer see it as AI. However, when there's still a bit of a 'filter' or some vague impression, AI seems like something quite mysterious and fantastical. (2b)

To sum up, interviewees' perspectives on AI—particularly generative AI (GenAI)—are centred on its recent emergence and popular applications such as ChatGPT. Interviewees equated AI with GenAI and described organisational encouragement to explore AI tools in journalistic work. While AI was viewed as a means to enhance efficiency and reduce costs, interviewees remained sceptical about its ability to replace human creativity and raised concerns about data privacy and the potential for errors. Alongside optimism about its potential, they also highlighted challenges, including limited organisational resources and the absence of clear guidelines on the use of AI in journalism.

"AI is Not a Hype"

RQ2 explored how journalists perceived the hype around AI and navigated the hype surrounding AI. Interviewees offered differing views on the media attention given to

AI. Some acknowledged a degree of hype, while others considered the heightened focus on AI appropriate, highlighting the responsibility of the news media to cover AI-related developments:

> I think it (AI) really deserves our attention… I think the current wave of AI hype isn't overhyped. If it were purely driven by hype, it wouldn't have sustained the current impact. This wave of AI certainly has some truly impressive results. It's not something I can stop or ignore. Even if I don't hype it up, it will still happen. It's a fact, a reality that exists, whether we like it or not. (1h)

Interviewees described AI reporting as largely event-driven, often prompted occurrences such as AI summits, product launches, instances of AI misuse, or the release of new regulations. They rarely approached AI as a standalone editorial topic. This approach contrasted with specialised self-media or user-generated content channels that focus more consistently on AI-related themes. When covering AI topics, interviewees indicated they conveyed a critical perspective:

> I think this is a complex issue that requires a balanced perspective. When a new technology emerges, outright opposition or rejection is certainly not in line with the trends of the times. However, as we adopt it, the key is how to use it in a rational and scientific manner, while ensuring it aligns with ethics and standards. It's not about blindly rejecting or fully embracing it, but rather approaching it from a more nuanced, dialectical perspective. (2a)

> As a journalist, I approach this from a critical perspective. We often need to apply critical thinking to discern the validity of many so-called technologies. Just as you mentioned, sometimes there's a lot of hype and buzz around certain concepts. As media professionals, we also look forward to technological advancements, but we must remain objective and balanced in our reporting on these developments. We can't simply take someone's word when they claim AI will change the world and amplify it without scrutiny. We have a responsibility to report truthfully rather than just promoting every claim we hear. (3a)

Interviewees reflected on the selection of sources for AI-related reporting, echoing concerns about the growing number of self-proclaimed AI experts (Markelius et al. 2024). Industry professionals were often valued because of their proximity to developments in the field, though interviewees emphasised the importance of strict selection criteria, including international recognition, credibility, and professional reputation. Academics were frequently preferred, both for their perceived accessibility and for the depth of analysis they could provide. Across different accounts, interviewees stressed the need for caution when identifying appropriate sources to ensure informed and balanced reporting:

> First, we're not actively creating topics ourselves. For example, if AI is a hot topic at a forum, we cover AI. But at such forums, there are already many AI experts. However, I've noticed that even among experts, their views often vary. Some may say that AI is not yet a threat and that it's far from reaching human cognitive levels. But other experts might argue that the immediate concern is AI safety and that we need to establish safety rules, implying that AI is closer to human cognition than we might think…The sheer diversity of opinions, all coming from experts, makes it hard to determine who is correct. In such cases, we might choose not to showcase all these varied voices, especially when it's difficult to verify their accuracy. While diversity of opinion is valuable, it can also lead to misinformation. If a perspective is overly radical or potentially false, it may not be suitable for news reporting. (1c)

Interviewees also discussed the importance of addressing AI-related topics as part of their political assignments. They emphasised the need to frame critical perspectives in a constructive manner and to adopt a solution-oriented approach when covering sensitive or complex issues:

> We still strive to speak the truth as much as possible. Of course, negative aspects are inevitable, but we can approach them in a more constructive way. We'll try to be more suggestive, for example, when discussing potential negative aspects of AI. There will naturally be scholars who raise concerns, but we prefer to address these issues from a solution-oriented perspective. For instance, if you're worried about certain potential outcomes, you can also propose your solutions or recommendations on how to address them. (2d)

To sum up, interviewees acknowledged that although AI has attracted considerable media attention, this focus was seen as warranted in light of the technology's impact and rapid development. In this context, interviewees distanced themselves from the notion of media hype as defined by Vasterman (2005, p.527) as "a special kind of news wave created by the self-reinforcing processes in the news production". Rather than amplifying coverage through self-reinforcing dynamics, interviewees described their reporting on AI as guided by editorial judgement and societal relevance. They emphasised the importance of maintaining a critical and balanced approach—neither uncritically embracing AI nor dismissing it outright. Caution was exercised in the selection of sources, with a preference for industry professionals and academics who were perceived as credible and informed. Interviewees also stressed the need for responsible reporting that takes into account both the opportunities and the risks associated with AI.

Encouraged Loyal-Facilitator and Constrained Watchdog

RQ3 explored the journalistic roles reflected in how journalists perceived AI-related hype and adopted reporting strategies. One prominent role that emerged was that of the *loyal-facilitator*, with interviewees positioning themselves as active contributors to shaping public opinion in alignment with national strategies:

> We say that artificial intelligence is a new productive force, and it will transform many industries. Therefore, from a public opinion perspective, we are inclined to view the developments brought by AI positively. As a result, our reports will indeed include more discussions on the positive aspects of AI. (1d)

> The news media doesn't tell lies; rather, it selectively tells the truth. This means that while it may not cover the negative aspects, it focuses more on the positive and beneficial sides… the nature of news is to serve the best interests of the country and society. I believe this represents the greatest interest group—our nation, society, and people. This is what gives meaning to journalism, and I think it reflects the professional ethics of those in the field. (3a)

Although overall sentiments towards AI were positive, interviewees indicated that they also engaged in critical reporting. One example involved coverage of fraud cases linked to deepfake technologies. Interviewee 1d described being assigned a service-oriented piece with the aim of informing the public on how to distinguish between authentic and AI-generated video content. In reporting the report, they

interviewed both local police authorities and representatives from technology companies, who offered guidance on relevant technical indicators. Other interviewees also discussed covering similar topics, highlighting a role that combines public service with technological literacy:

> In our program, we never deny the potential downsides of AI development, nor do we report in a way that ignores these issues. Personally, I believe that technological innovation brings significant benefits to our lives. We shouldn't dismiss these advancements entirely just because they might be misused by some people… However, there is a clear boundary, both in my personal view and in the perspectives, we present to our audience. Effective and robust regulation is essential. We cannot allow AI to develop unchecked, as this could lead to serious problems. Without proper oversight, the consequences of unchecked AI development are unpredictable and could be significant. (1g)

> What I'm looking forward to more is having reports that encourage critical thinking, meaning reports that highlight potential dangers. Because, actually, I feel that the reports I've seen tend to be more positive and are more likely to make people think by raising a few questions, but they don't deeply analyse the issues. (1f)

Critical reporting on AI reflected not only the *watchdog role* but also the *civic role* of journalists. In reflecting on the broader scarcity of critical coverage, interviewees pointed to a range of constraints that limited their ability to engage in more investigative or questioning reporting on AI-related issues:

> I believe that, first of all, there is indeed a noticeable gap between the Chinese and international media in terms of professionalism. This is something we shouldn't shy away from. In many aspects, such as topic selection, investigative techniques, and the allocation of resources for investigations, international media, especially in Europe and the US, are more willing to invest significantly. This investment allows them to produce in-depth, investigative content, reflecting their strength in this area. Chinese media has room for improvement in topic selection and resource allocation for investigative reporting compared to their international counterparts. (1e)

> These tech companies (in China) are actually very conservative and closed-off. Their attitude toward the media is not as open. They approach the media with caution and vigilance…The media environment is very competitive, so as an institutional media outlet, the time given to journalists for assignments or creative work is becoming increasingly shorter, and they have to produce many pieces continuously. Therefore, sometimes, they may not have the time and energy to thoroughly work on a quality article. (4a)

Interviewees also described the complex relationships between news organisations and technology companies, noting that some media outlets may have received investments from the very companies they reported on. In such cases, editorial independence could be influenced by these financial ties. For example, interviewee 4a explained that when encountering insider information about a major Chinese tech company, they would typically consult their supervisor first to determine whether reporting on the issue might create complications. Seeking approval before proceeding was described as a precautionary step to navigate potential organisational sensitivities.

> And as for many other media outlets, the current environment for media in the country is not very friendly. If you publish a relatively negative news story about a company, the company's PR team will immediately contact the journalist, trying to get the story retracted or something similar. If you publish a really significant piece of news, it could lead to a lot of trouble later on. (4a)

In summary, interviewees described their journalistic role as *loyal-facilitators*, highlighting the perceived benefits of AI and aligning their reporting with broader national strategies. While critical coverage—such as reports on deepfake-related fraud—was present, in-depth analysis remained constrained. Interviewees pointed to factors such as competitive media environments, cautious corporate communication from technology companies, and limited time for reporting as barriers to more comprehensive coverage. They also noted that potential conflicts of interest and pressures from tech companies could influence editorial decisions, sometimes discouraging the publication of unfavourable stories. Despite a commitment to balanced reporting, interviewees indicated they had encountered significant challenges in producing thorough and independent coverage of AI-related developments.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through a qualitative analysis of 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Chinese journalists working across a range of news outlets in China, the study investigated how journalists construct algorithmic imaginaries, perceive the surrounding hype of AI, and articulate their professional roles in covering AI-related topics. Positioned as both users and mediators of algorithmic systems, journalists play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of these technologies. This dual role is evident in the way they contribute to the formation of algorithmic and sociotechnical imaginaries, while also having their own work practices structured by these imaginaries (Deuze and Beckett 2022). In this sense, journalists influence how algorithms are imagined by the public and the algorithm-related issues are framed, prioritised and communicated within the news media. At the same time, journalists' perceptions of the roles that algorithms play in society and their alignment with the interests of various stakeholders are shaped by broader discourses and evolving technical knowledge (Ji et al. 2024; van Noort 2024).

The study finds that, similar to their counterparts in Western contexts (Jones et al. 2022), Chinese journalists tend to view AI as a set of tools rather than a threat to their professional roles—despite often having limited awareness of the specific AI systems and algorithms embedded in their daily workflow. Their algorithmic imaginaries are largely shaped by generative AI applications, such as ChatGPT, yet they demonstrate awareness of these systems' capacities, limitations, potential risks, including issues related to privacy and security. In addition, Chinese journalists' algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher 2017) are informed by broader, nationally held sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2009), which carry elements of techno-nationalism (Luo 2022). These imaginaries influence journalistic practices, including the formulation of interview questions around dominant narratives such as the US–China AI rivalry, and the selection of AI-related stories that are perceived as aligning with state interests. Consistent with findings from Yu and Huang (2021) regarding adaptability and resilience among Chinese journalists in the face of technological change, this study also highlights journalists' acute awareness of the chain of accountability. Interviewees described strategies to avoid assuming full responsibility for AI-generated content—such as disclosing the use of AI tools or deliberately maintaining human oversight in production workflows. In this context, the full automation of newswork is neither

feasible nor desirable, given the foundational journalistic requirement that responsibility and accountability must ultimately rest with human actors.

In relation to the discourse surrounding AI hype, the Chinese journalists interviewed in this study expressed scepticism toward self-proclaimed AI experts and their often-overstated levels of technological literacy (Markelius et al. 2024). They also reflected on the complex interplay between state agendas, investment markets, and consumer markets in shaping the infrastructure and knowledge apparatus that underpins the construction of AI's value (Bourne 2024). However, the journalists did not characterise their own reporting as contributing to media hype. As they emphasised, editorial decisions were not driven by self-reinforcing cycles, nor were AI topics artificially generated within newsrooms. Rather, the sustained coverage of AI was attributed to the ongoing relevance and impact of technological development (Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær 2009). From this perspective, if AI is perceived as being surrounded by hype, the journalists contended that it is, in fact, justified. This highlights the need to contextualise and potentially revise existing theories of media hype, particularly when applied to non-Western contexts. In navigating what has been labelled the "global AI hype", Chinese journalists viewed their own coverage as proportionate and appropriate. To maintain critical distance, they employed strategies that included weighing both the opportunities and limitations of AI technologies, carefully selecting credible and trustworthy sources, and actively enhancing their own knowledge and skills. These findings suggest that journalists who resist contributing to media hype may be better positioned to fulfil their public service responsibilities, offering more informed and balanced reporting that helps audiences critically engage with AI developments.

Chinese journalists also demonstrated a strong *loyal-facilitator* role in reporting on AI, aligning their narratives with national strategies that position AI as a critical asset in China's development agenda (van Noort 2024). This alignment was reflected in the selective emphasis on the positive potentials of AI and a solution-oriented framing when addressing its limitations or risks. This is not to suggest an absence of the *watchdog* role in Chinese journalism (Ji et al. 2024). However, the exercise of this role is significantly constrained by political structures, the entangled relationships between media organisations and technology companies—some of which may hold financial interests in the media—and the pressures of a competitive media market landscape. Some journalists expressed concern over the limited development of algorithmic accountability reporting (Diakopoulos 2015), acknowledging a perceived gap between the Chinese news media and their Western counterparts. These accounts underscore how institutional, political, and economic constraints shape journalistic roles and influence the construction of algorithmic and sociotechnical imaginaries. The findings further illustrate the multistakeholder nature of AI's co-construction, emphasising the need to consider both spatial and temporal dynamics (Hecht 2012) and the multiple sites at which politics is enacted (Duez and Bellanova 2012). The analysis also highlights the ontological politics of AI, revealing it as a contested terrain shared by the interactions between human and non-human actors (Hecht 2012), and points to the powerful role of sociotechnical imaginaries in co-producing the very "thingness" of AI (Suchman 2023).

This study adopts a sociotechnical analytical approach to examine how Chinese journalists navigate the discourse surrounding AI, highlighting that both AI

technologies and news media participate in the co-constitution of the social world (Bucher 2017). The findings reinforce earlier calls for enhanced AI literacy among newsworkers (Deuze and Beckett 2022) and greater transparency around the opaque infrastructures and knowledge apparatus that underpin the value construction and legitimation of AI (Bourne 2024). By situating the discursive construction of AI within China's distinct political context and media landscape, the study reveals the complexity and multiplicity of the communicative space, underscoring the importance of integrating journalistic perspectives into further theorisation of media hype (Vasterman 2005; Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær 2009). Focusing on AI—a subject situated at the intersection of various stakeholders and sociotechnical systems—the study illustrates that the *loyal facilitator* and *watchdog* are not inherently contradictory (Ji et al. 2024). Rather, journalists may embody both roles depending on context, institutional constraints, and narrative framing. In light of this, the study argues for more nuanced conceptualisations of journalistic roles that account for power relations extending beyond the traditional binary of state and media. Such frameworks should include the influence of private enterprises, transnational technological infrastructures, and the materialities of AI itself (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 2018).

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. While the sample of 18 journalists offers valuable insights, it does not encompass the full range of perspectives across China's diverse media landscape. Moreover, the qualitative design of the study limits the generalisability of the findings. Nevertheless, the research serves as a building block in addressing the shifting dynamics between the state, the tech industry, private enterprise, and journalism as an institution. Future research could examine the phenomenon in different geopolitical contexts or by adopting historical or comparative approaches to deepen understanding of how journalistic roles and algorithmic imaginaries evolve across different media systems.

Submission Statement

I confirm that I agree to the submission and that the article is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal.

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AI Disclosure Statement

I confirm that I have used ChatGPT (GPT-4o) and DeepSeek-V3 in the preparation of this manuscript for stylistic and grammatical refinement. The AI tool was utilised to enhance clarity, coherence, and readability, but all intellectual contributions, arguments, and analyses remain my own.

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ORCID

Joanne Kuai http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0920-8153

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