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To cite this article: Yulong Zhang, Kexin Feng, Chujie Chen & Peng Xiao (29 Sep 2025): Mob censorship in China: *ChiRenxueMantou*, digital press criticism, and journalists' failed jurisdiction, Chinese Journal of Communication, DOI: [10.1080/17544750.2025.2565799](https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2025.2565799)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2025.2565799>

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Mob censorship in China: *ChiRenxueMantou*, digital press criticism, and journalists' failed jurisdiction

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ABSTRACT

Despite its global prominence, Chinese digital press criticism remains understudied. In the wake of the controversial coverage of the China Eastern Airlines flight MU5735 crash, the vernacular rhetoric “*ChiRenxueMantou*” (eating blood-soaked buns) crystallized as a moral challenge to journalism’s professional jurisdiction. By extending professional jurisdiction theory with a moral–affective dimension, this article frames China’s “*ChiRenxueMantou*” discourse as a contest over journalism’s moral–affective jurisdiction and examines the conflict between epistemic and moral–affective claims. We employ discourse and semantic network analyses to examine how *ChiRenxueMantou* operates as a multi-layered critique—assessing professional norms, attributing moral blame, and fueling mob-style censorship. Journalistic defenses combined organizational silence with four individual strategies: disclosing news-making processes, explaining editorial considerations, recalling classic reports, and countering malicious criticisms. However, these epistemic claims grounded in professional criteria failed to counter criticism and attacks driven by moral affective judgments. In China’s turbulent digital media environment, journalistic jurisdiction proves conditionally permeable, shaped by an intertwined state–platform–public nexus whose dynamics are still underexplored. The implications of mob-style digital press criticism for Chinese journalism are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 March 2025
Accepted 2 September 2025


KEYWORDS

Digital press criticism;
ChiRenxueMantou;
jurisdiction; mob
censorship; journalist–
audience relationship

Introduction

It was March 21, 2022. China Eastern Airlines flight MU5735 tragically crashed in south China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, killing all 132 people aboard. The next day, the Chinese news magazine *People* (《人物》) released “Passengers on Flight MU5735,” a human-interest report that sparked intense online debate. While some praised its emotional depth, others condemned it as *ChiRenxueMantou* (eating

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2025.2565799>

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blood-soaked buns, 吃人血馒头)—a culturally resonant metaphor accusing journalists of exploiting grief. This public backlash exemplifies digital press criticism in which vernacular moral outrage becomes a form of mob censorship, reflecting an escalation from individual critique to collective moral enforcement, challenging Chinese journalism's professional jurisdiction.

ChiRenxueMantou is a traditional vernacular discourse with literary meaning and critical connotations. The term has been widely recognized since the Republican era, particularly due to Lu Xun's novel *Medicine* (《药》). In the novel, a pair of ignorant parents try to make their son eat steamed buns soaked in the blood of a revolutionary to cure his tuberculosis. Ironically, the revolutionary sacrificed his life for the liberation of the people, yet the people fought to drink his blood (Ma, 2025).

Lu Xun originally used *ChiRenxueMantou* to criticize the superstitions and apathy of early 20th-century Chinese society. In the social media era, however, the term has evolved to accuse individuals of exploiting others' misfortunes for personal gain. The term was once directed at non-institutional content creators. However, since approximately 2017, it has increasingly targeted professional media—particularly in coverage involving victims, such as the *Jiang Ge* case¹—alleging ethical violations driven by traffic chasing and emotional insensitivity. The trope of *ChiRenxueMantou* attempts not only to deny journalism's right to report on tragedy but also to morally delegitimize its authority.

This phenomenon is far from isolated. Half of the journalists surveyed by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism claim to have been “very” or “quite often” exposed to press criticism (Newman, 2023). Digital press criticism, as Carlson et al. (2021) put it, is “the use of non-journalistic platforms as a means for critiquing journalism.” Concurrently, the use of pejorative labels such as “fake news” and “lying press” to attack journalism has become a global concern (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Harlow et al., 2023; Koliska & Assmann, 2021).

Despite growing global interest in digital press criticism, the Chinese context remains underexplored. Chinese journalism not only shares many patterns observed globally but also has distinct features. For example, public critiques seldom reference “fake news.” Unlike their Western populist counterparts, Chinese officials rarely target the media directly. Instead, intense online user “reporting” (举报, a state-sanctioned channel for public oversight) on social platforms can trigger internal investigations and official sanctions, effectively silencing journalistic responses (Wang, 2024). Following Lewis (2012), in the media sociology of the twenty first century, “locating how, where, and why jurisdictional claims are made is essential for capturing how changes are occurring.” We contend that the trope of *ChiRenxueMantou*—vernacular moral outrage weaponized online—offers a potent lens for understanding how online audiences challenge journalism's jurisdiction within a highly regulated digital media environment.

This article makes two contributions to scholarship on digital press criticism and digital journalism. First, this work highlights the significance of considering the context sensitivity of the journalism–society relationship. We argue that mob censorship, such as the *ChiRenxueMantou* discourse, operates as a culturally embedded, emotionally charged form of journalistic boundary policing that enables the collective

delegitimization of journalistic authority. Second, this study reframes morally outraged online publics as significant actors whose evaluative power can, under certain technological-cum-political conditions, reshape journalistic behaviors beyond institutional regulation.

Literature review

Professional jurisdiction

Sociological studies of the professions since Freidson (1988, pp. 71–72) have argued that a profession maintains an exclusive right to “determine who can legitimately do its work and how the work should be done.” While Freidson focuses on the autonomy of professions, Andrew Abbott (1988) asks why and how any expert occupation gains power through considering the system of professions. According to his view, occupations are not self-contained; however, their boundaries and identities evolve during interactions with other professions. Abbott focuses less on a linear professionalization path and more on the dynamic interplay of competing jurisdictions.

Jurisdiction is the core relationship between a profession and its work. Hence, it is the claimed authority to define and control certain problems and tasks. Abbott defines *jurisdiction* as a profession’s exclusive right to perform a task, define its meaning, and regulate its execution, both legally and culturally. This right is not just a legal status but is constituted through social settlements with key audiences, that is, the state, workplaces, clients, or the public (Abbott, 1988, p. 99). However, in *The System of Professions*, Abbott’s primary concern is interprofessional competition. He relatively overlooked conflicts between professions and their clients or the public. Abbott did acknowledge that technology, politics, and other social forces can fragment professional tasks and reorganize jurisdictions (Abbott, 1988, p. 35). However, he did not treat the public’s technologically enabled power to judge professions as a focus of his theory.

Nevertheless, Abbott’s theory of professional jurisdiction has been fruitfully applied in journalism studies to understand how news work is defined and defended. A key insight is that journalism is unusually “permeable.” Abbott (1988, p. 225) observes that journalism historically does not fully exclude outsiders: One can enter the field without formal degrees or licenses, unlike medicine or law. Journalistic claims to expertise rest on norms, such as objectivity and news judgment, though the occupation lacks strict credential barriers. Scholars have used this idea to analyze journalism’s professional status. Schudson and Anderson (2009) followed Abbott to illustrate that journalism in the U.S. has claimed jurisdiction over collecting and distributing qualified information through objectivity—asserting knowledge-based authority akin to other professions. Carlson (2016a) applies Abbott’s framework to his influential work on metajournalistic discourse, demonstrating how journalists discursively engage in boundary work, publicly reiterating journalistic norms to demarcate the profession from competing social actors. Riedl (2023) draws on Abbott to describe journalism as a “profession of conditional permeability,” meaning that journalists assert unique skills to exclude amateurs, yet acknowledge that many aspects of news work are open to other professionals or the public.

With users' shift to social media platforms for accessing news, the turbulent media environment enables news audiences to criticize journalism anytime and anywhere, setting the stage for the flourishing of digital press criticism (Carlson et al., 2021). Facing these changes, journalism is obliged to explain its news production process, professional norms, and ethos to external audiences constantly to sustain its authority and maintain jurisdiction (Carlson, 2016a).

Digital press criticism as jurisdictional conflicts

Although digital press criticism can prompt valuable self-reflection, such as helping journalists refine practices and clarify their public role (Cheruiyot, 2018), recent studies have shown that it often escalates into overreach. Routine stories become targets of extreme backlash, and journalists frequently face online harassment for coverage the profession deems standard. This suggests that, without guardrails, digital criticism can undermine rather than strengthen journalistic practice. In South Korea, the *giraegi* discourse (a Korean compound of "journalist" and "trash") began as legitimate supervision of the media. It eventually turned into a daily expression of hatred and disgust toward journalism rather than producing normative and constructive effects. Moreover, journalists are considered "pollutants" who tarnish Korean society and are thereby viewed as a threat to eliminate (Shin et al., 2021). Waisbord (2020) describes this phenomenon in terms of the concept of "mob censorship," which suggests that ordinary citizens attempt to exert power over journalists through discursive violence to browbeat them into silence.

On one hand, the global ascendance of populism makes certain audiences prone to emotionally attributing blame to elites, particularly those in the mainstream media, who do not align with populist ideologies (Hameleers et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2020). On the other hand, the affordances of the internet have enabled online mobs to easily form like-minded groups, coordinate bottom-up actions, and initiate censorship anonymously and without accountability (Neilson & Ortiga, 2023).

That is, digital press criticism causes mental stress and emotional trauma to journalists, instilling fears about their own and their families' safety (Holton et al., 2023; Tandoc et al., 2023). Such pressures may ultimately compel them to leave the profession entirely (Lee & Kim, 2024). Moreover, among the journalists who remain, widespread insecurity can drive self-censorship, intensifying the chilling effect in news organizations (Hamada, 2022).

Nevertheless, journalism has sometimes responded directly to digital press criticism. Indian journalists positioned President Narendra Modi and his followers as failed and fake watchdogs by employing a discursive model of self-positioning and other positioning, demonstrating Modi's dereliction of duty as a watchdog and journalists' success in doing so (Koliska et al., 2025). In response to President Donald Trump's accusations, American journalists have defended journalism through a variety of discursive strategies, such as emphasizing established journalistic norms, highlighting journalism's central role in the maintenance of democracy, criticizing Trump, and calling for action (Koliska et al., 2020). Other researchers have adopted a comparative approach. Cheruiyot (2024), for instance, identified four categories of journalists' resistance discourses against digital press criticism: consolidation (ringfencing

journalistic discourse), filtering (cleaning up journalistic discourse), rationalization (acknowledging criticism or non-responses), and counter-discourse (counteracting anti-media discourses). Overall, it can be concluded that journalism, across legal, institutional, and societal contexts, faces similar yet nuanced variations of digital press criticism and develops corresponding response strategies.

In the Chinese context, journalistic jurisdiction is challenged less on technical grounds, but more on moral legitimacy—whether journalism deserves its power and rights. Digital press criticism in China often originates not from competing professions (as in Abbott’s framework) but from networked publics whose folk epistemologies and affective responses challenge journalistic authority. Anti-press discourse such as “*ChiRenxueMantou*” exemplifies what we might call vernacular jurisdictional contestation: folk language that moralizes and delegitimizes journalistic authority. These criticisms gain traction not because of competing abstract knowledge, but through socially viral, emotionally resonant frames. Such moral–affective challenges bypass journalism’s epistemic criteria and directly contest journalism’s right to frame events as newsworthy and humane. By accusing the media of “*ChiRenxueMantou*,” online audiences deny journalism’s moral right to report on tragedy. The discourse claims that Chinese journalists have violated their ethical jurisdiction and thus forfeit their authority over narrative framing. The vernacular discourse of “*ChiRenxueMantou*” vividly illustrates how online audiences use moral–affective judgments to evaluate journalism, shifting public critique from knowledge-based assessments to emotionally charged moral scrutiny. This represents a major emerging challenge for Chinese journalism because it aligns with the amplification dynamics of social media platforms. Moral outrage toward journalism is not only intensified by emotionally reactive audiences, but is also magnified through the affective cascades enabled by digital sharing, creating heightened pressures that profoundly challenge journalism’s moral legitimacy and jurisdiction.

Against this backdrop, we expand Abbott’s jurisdiction theory to include moral–affective jurisdiction, that is, journalism’s socially recognized right to report news without appearing morally illegitimate. Drawing on theories of Abbott’s professional jurisdiction and meta-journalistic discourse, we conducted a case study of the *ChiRenxueMantou* discourse in Chinese digital press criticism. The major research questions are as follows:

- RQ1: How does the *ChiRenxueMantou* discourse function as a moral–emotional challenge to journalistic jurisdiction?
- RQ2: What defensive strategies do news organizations and journalists use in response to such criticism?
- RQ3: How do these discursive interactions affect journalistic jurisdiction and shape the future of Chinese journalism?

Case and method

We use the controversy over *People* magazine’s MU5735 coverage as a strategic case, analyzing digital press criticism and the journalistic responses it triggered. The report narrated victims’ stories through interviews with colleagues, friends, and relatives

alongside the deceased's own social media posts. Upon publication, it drew a backlash from audiences who likened it to *ChiRenxueMantou*. A widely circulated critique, "The Intrusion on Grief in *People's Report*," invoked professional terms such as *death knock* and *intruding on grief* to argue that the report breached journalistic ethics. This sparked a fierce public debate regarding the boundaries of journalism and the meaning of *ChiRenxueMantou*.

The data for this study were gathered from Weibo and WeChat, both among the most popular social media platforms in China. Weibo is similar to Twitter, where users share their views on current events in a relatively open space. In contrast, WeChat is more similar to Facebook, where discussions often occur within small, cohesive collections of like-minded individuals (Harwit, 2017). Therefore, when studying discussions among Chinese citizens on a particular issue, it is common to focus on the discourse collected from these two platforms (e.g. Huang, 2023; Sun & Chałupnik, 2022). In contrast, although Douyin is also a major social media platform in China, we found no large-scale discussions in the research case. This may stem from its short-form video- and entertainment-oriented nature. Correspondingly, it was excluded from the study.

Using the keyword *ChiRenxueMantou*, we employed the Selenium package in a Python 3.6.6 environment to simulate user behavior and retrieve Weibo comment data. The data collection focused on the week following the publication of the controversial article. After removing irrelevant and duplicate content, 1,944 valid comments were retained. We conducted another round of data collection from March 29 to March 31 using the same method but found no further comments related to the report. Consequently, we ceased data collection on Weibo. For WeChat, we used the same keyword to search for relevant content and filtered the results to obtain 91 long-form articles.

We divided the research data into two categories: public criticism and journalistic responses. Because public criticism primarily comprised fragmented comments and was more voluminous, we adopted a mixed-method approach that combined semantic network analysis (SNA) with discourse analysis. SNA has been effectively applied to identify key themes and analyze fragmented user-generated content on social media platforms (Boudana & Segev, 2024; Jiang et al., 2016). Using SNA, we mapped high-frequency words and inter-word relationships in the research data to illustrate the overall landscape of public criticism. Building on this network analysis, discourse analysis was used to derive a contextual understanding of the word clusters generated by SNA, uncovering the power dynamics and ideologies behind the discourse (Zhang et al., 2024). We started by importing data into ROST CM6.0 software to create the co-occurrence matrix, which was analyzed using Gephi0.9.7 software for semantic network analysis and visualized with the force-directed layout algorithm Fruchterman Reingold. Subsequently, we applied discourse analysis to both audience and journalistic texts. Drawing on established procedures in meta-journalistic discourse analysis (Carlson, 2016a; Geertsema-Sligh & Vos, 2022), we engaged in an iterative process of close reading and inductive coding, allowing abstract themes and jurisdictional claims to emerge organically.

For journalistic responses—mostly long-form essays and smaller in volume—we focused on discourse analysis to examine how journalists articulated professional boundaries, negotiated legitimacy, and responded to moralized criticism. To protect

personal privacy, all quoted materials were anonymized. Instances of public criticism are labeled U1, U2, etc., while journalistic responses are identified as J1, J2, and so on.

Findings

ChiRenxueMantou as anti-press criticism: three meanings of challenging journalistic jurisdiction

Figure 1 presents the results of the semantic network analysis of public criticism. Two key observations emerged from this result. First, the network's average clustering coefficient was 0.849, while its density was only 0.366. The high clustering coefficient and low density suggest that *ChiRenxueMantou* appeared in various comments with different meanings and contexts, indicating inconsistent usage and potential abuse of the term. Conversely, the discourse surrounding *ChiRenxueMantou* displayed several highly concentrated and interconnected core meanings. These meanings were closely related but rarely interacted with other concepts, forming a "small-world" network. Second, as displayed in Figure 1, the words most frequently co-occurring with *ChiRenxueMantou* and strongly connected to it were *media*, *report*, *relatives*, *news*, *interview*, *inadequate*, and *traffic*.

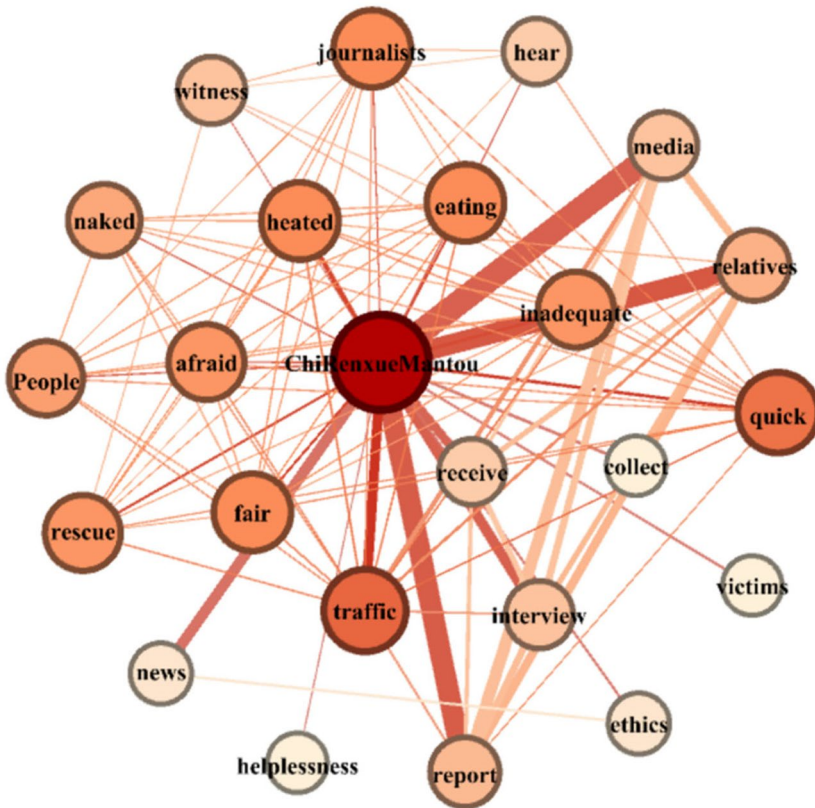


Figure 1. Semantic network of *ChiRenxueMantou* discourse.

Table 1. Three types of *ChiRenxueMantou* discourse.

Type	Core point	Example of typical comments
Criticizing the specific details of the report	Interviewing families and causing secondary trauma	"To go and disturb families at a time like this and have them tell their stories is rubbing salt in people's wounds! It's just bad! How many people can really empathize with the grief to that extent, other than the families?"
	Violating the privacy of the victims	"What's the meaning of writing this out? Is it just to satisfy someone's curiosity?"
	Rushing to interviews and jumping to conclusions	"Isn't this <i>ChiRenxueMantou</i> ? The families and netizens are waiting for a miracle, and these unscrupulous media are declaring death."
Criticizing the motivation of journalists	Reporting for online traffic	"Do whatever it takes for traffic, that's the media today."
Criticizing something unrelated to the report	Criticizing the past of the media	"To remind you of this media outlet's actions during COVID-19: they entered a Wuhan <i>Fangcang</i> hospital, found it full of positive stories, but were ultimately disappointed."
	Criticizing all of Chinese journalism	"Why does Chinese journalism insist on being the uncrowned king and look down on everything?"
	Confusing self-media with professional media	"New media nowadays is really heartless. Before I ran my company's self-media, my boss told me that if it wasn't miserable enough, we wouldn't get traffic."

We further examined digital press criticism and presented the findings in Table 1. The *ChiRenxueMantou* discourse revealed three meanings, progressively detaching from the original report and evolving toward more extreme interpretations.

The initial criticism targeted the specific actions of journalists, arguing that they should have avoided causing secondary distress to victims' families, particularly through nighttime interviews that might have intensified their grief. For instance, one comment read, "The families are already devastated, yet the journalists continue to harass them. How much longer will this go on? Can they please show some respect for their families?" (U1). Regarding certain details in the report, social media users viewed them as irrelevant to the investigation into the actual cause of the crash and as violations of victims' privacy rights. Furthermore, *People* published the article within 24 h after the crash, which sparked further dissatisfaction. Critics contended that the media should not have rushed into interviews or drawn conclusions while rescue efforts were still ongoing and families were hoping for a miracle.

This type of criticism primarily relied on empathetic reasoning, which was easily shared and quickly disseminated. A widely liked comment read, "Would you want the press to interview you immediately after your family member dies, without knowing how they got your phone number? Is that what you want?" (U2). The widespread use of such reasoning, however, highlights that digital press criticism is rooted more in shared secular ethics than in professional journalistic ethics. In summary, the public tends to evaluate journalists' professional conduct based on mundane ethics and intrinsic considerations, rather than attempting to understand the professional rationale behind news practices.

A second type of criticism centered on the press's motivation for publishing the report as unethical practices of chasing traffic. As one comment stated, "In order to compete for attention and traffic, they even fabricated a term like 'golden reporting period,' fearing they hadn't gotten their fill of blood-soaked buns in a righteous

manner" (U3). Another comment added, "Journalism has completely been hijacked by traffic, with traffic as the supreme pursuit" (U4). Such an inference, however, was not rational and represented an unfalsifiable argument because journalists could not prove that their actions were not driven by the desire for traffic.

Conversely, the widespread dissemination of the report only served to reinforce this inference. It was this critique of motivation that transformed *People* from merely operationally flawed to morally culpable media. At this point, the label *ChiRenxueMantou* became officially associated with *People*. The creation of such emotional labels significantly amplified the influence and spread of digital press criticism.

The third type of criticism was entirely detached from the report, itself, primarily manifesting as "criticizing the past of the media," "criticizing all Chinese journalism," and "confusing self-media with professional media and criticizing both together," among other forms.

Notably, the most distinctive criticism involved recalling previous reports to highlight the "dirty past" of the media. As one comment stated, "Since the *Liu Xuezhou* case, I have been utterly disgusted by some so-called journalists. A bunch of troublemakers who stir up sentiment!" (U5). Carlson (2016b) argued that digital press criticism is highly prone to activating inherited narratives and citing them to fuel debates. The concept of a "dirty past" is one such inherited narrative. The "dirty past" narrative seeks to emphasize the media's historical flaws by referencing past controversial events. It suggests persistent issues with media ethics and journalistic professionalism, ultimately damaging the moral reputation of journalism. This narrative mobilizes the public, especially those who are uninformed, to join the ranks of media critics. In clarification, many of these narratives do not accurately reflect the events in question but often distort facts through selective editing and unreasonable attributions of blame, placing full responsibility on the media (see also Yao & Xie, 2023). For instance, some criticism resurfaced *People's* reports on COVID-19 and *Fangcang* hospitals² to argue that the magazine has a negative tone and is unpatriotic. The "dirty past" narrative reflects a longstanding distrust and hostility toward the media, a sentiment increasingly amplified with the rapid rise of social media platforms (Henrichsen & Shelton, 2023).

This third type of criticism interacted with the other two types, reinforcing the perception that the media had become accustomed to "eating blood-soaked buns." At this point, similar to the term *fake news*, *ChiRenxueMantou* was no longer confined to a single case but had evolved into a label used to delegitimize and criminalize journalism (Miller, 2023). It also illustrates that memory-based digital press criticism can escalate into mob censorship, especially when framed as evidence of structural corruption or moral rot in journalism as a profession.

Journalistic response: organizational silence and personalized resistance

The emergence of large-scale digital press criticism turned this controversial event into a "hot moment" in debates over journalistic ethics (Zelizer, 1993). The journalistic response to the *ChiRenxueMantou* discourse was characterized by both organizational silence and personalized responses. On one hand, news organizations seemed to avoid addressing the issue. On the other hand, current and former journalists spoke

out individually, forming a temporary interpretive community and deploying four discursive strategies to maintain journalistic jurisdiction.

Organizational silence

As shown in Table 2, only two media institutions, *People* and *Red Star News*, actually stated their organizational attitudes toward digital press criticism. *People* responded with a message in the comment section, arguing that reporting on the victims' stories "is a record, a wake-up call, and a reflection." *Red Star News* published an opinion article that stated the following:

We should not criticize the news based on an objective and factual stance, upholding humanistic concerns while avoiding sensationalism. We should also refrain from blaming the report for the progress of the rescue and investigation. These reports should not be arbitrarily labeled by public opinion as *ChiRenxueMantou*.

Otherwise, only a few news organizations discussed the issue, generally presenting a variety of perspectives in the form of interviews with experts and refusing to take a clear stance on the matter. For example, in the article "How to Do Disaster Reporting? Listen to What Experts Say" published by *China News Service*, both negative and supportive views on *People's Report* were presented:

Some experts believe that in-depth reports on victims and their families should only be undertaken once the situation has been handled to some extent. Journalists should be mindful of the timing of the interviews to minimize secondary trauma. However, other experts argue that the deceased and their families should be included in news coverage.

And although *People* initially issued a response, the magazine eventually withdrew the article within 48h of publication. Subsequently, other media outlets reporting on the families of the victims relied on interviewees to share their stories in the first person, rather than allowing journalists to conduct multiple interviews and investigations. Articles exemplified the media's cautious adjustment, including "I'm Willing to Tell: My Sister and Brother-in-Law Are on That Plane, and a 1.5-Year-Old Niece" (*China Youth Daily*) and "Wife of a Victim of MU5735: I Want to Take My Husband Back Home" (*Phoenix Weekly*).

The organizational silence of journalism in the face of digital press criticism is unusual from a diachronic perspective. In 2019, when media outlets published the story of a Chinese girl who died in an Ethiopian Airlines crash, they faced similar

Table 2. News organizations' responses to *ChiRenxueMantou*.

Category	Source	Article Title
Unspecified opinions	<i>Beijing news</i>	Disinformation, characters, and animated restoration: 10 types of presentation in the coverage of the China Eastern Airline crash.
	<i>Chinese journalists</i>	In-depth thoughts on air crash coverage: defending journalistic ethics and innovating reporting styles.
	<i>China news service</i>	How to do disaster reporting? Listen to what experts say.
	<i>Tea Party of Media</i>	Is controversial reporting a problem?
	<i>Chinaxwcb</i>	What do journalism experts think about controversial topics in disaster reporting?
Supporting <i>People</i>	<i>Red Star News</i>	There's no way to compare normal reporting to the marketing of a plane crash.

accusations of *ChiRenxueMantou*. However, then-news organizations, including *China Youth Daily* and *Tencent News*, published articles that strongly refuted digital press criticism. The *Beijing News* published several opinion articles, including “Why Is the Story of the Victims Worth Telling?” and “Don’t Blame the News Coverage of the Victims on *ChiRenxueMantou*.”

The move from resistance to silence reflects a strategic calculation by the Chinese media. Openly challenging digital press criticism risks fueling more public outrage and triggering coordinated state–society responses, at which cyberbullying and mass reporting converge to justify official intervention (Fang, 2024; Huang, 2023). In this context, continued pushback would effectively position outlets in opposition to both audiences and authorities, which is an untenable stance in China’s media landscape. Simultaneously, stricter regulations on sensitive topics, such as the MU5735 crash, leave little room for in-depth reporting. Facing these pressures, media organizations opt for quiet de-escalation to minimize online scrutiny and avert harsher sanctions.

Personalized resistance

In contrast to organizational silence, individual journalists mobilized quickly to initiate public rebuttals. They understood that *ChiRenxueMantou* was not just an attack on *People* magazine, but on journalism’s collective authority. Consequently, journalists framed their defense as an endeavor to safeguard the profession (Lischka, 2019), not merely vindicating one article, but preserving journalism’s right to report in the public interest. To that end, they deployed four key discursive strategies to reaffirm journalism’s professional jurisdiction, each of which is explored in turn below.

Showcasing news production with transparency. News production often appears to be a “black box” to the public, leaving them unaware of how journalists compile their reports. This lack of understanding frequently leads to misunderstandings and mistrust. Consequently, transparency has gradually been called on to replace objectivity as a new means of enhancing audience trust. Transparency manifests in various forms, one of which is disclosure transparency, that is, explaining the news production process and the reasons behind it (Karlsson, 2010). Research has shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese journalists used vlogs to disclose the story behind their coverage of the Wuhan lockdown. Self-disclosure strengthens emotional connections with the audience and enhances public trust (Meng & Wang, 2025).

In this case, journalists primarily employed disclosure transparency. Drawing on their own experiences, they explained to the public why *People*’s actions aligned with journalistic ethics and why interviewing the families of victims did not constitute secondary trauma. On the one hand, “the families are not as fragile as the audience imagines” (J1). Many family members actively reach out to the media to express their grief and raise questions. On the other hand, families also seek media attention to “increase visibility and call for the investigation of the incident” (J2). By citing examples from past interviews, journalists aimed to prove that the relationship between reporters and families is not a utilitarian, one-way dynamic of “interviewing and being interviewed.” Instead, it is a reciprocal relationship characterized by “companionship and warmth” (J3).

However, journalists' self-disclosure did not appear to have achieved the desired effect. When a journalist posted an attempt to explain the story behind the news, it became evident that most of the supportive comments in the post's comment section came from their followers. On the other hand, those who were not followers were generally more skeptical of the journalist's claims, with remarks such as "Saying something like this shows a lack of conscience" or "This is the first time I've seen someone make such a pompous statement about *ChiRenxueMantou*." This aligns with recent findings: Transparency is most effective at deepening trust among those who already have positive views of journalism, rather than convincing the deeply skeptical (Kahn, 2025).

Explaining the logic of news value considerations. Reporting on the deceased in disasters often places the media in the dilemma of balancing competing news values. However, journalism has established a consensus on certain aspects of these trade-offs, which became particularly evident in the discussions surrounding *People's* report.

For instance, in addressing whether *People* violated the victims' right to privacy, a member of the editorial board at *Beijing Youth Daily* argued: "If the information is something the individual willingly disclosed, such as through a Weibo post, it is not protected by the right to privacy." (J4) Furthermore, privacy rights do not extend to certain information, such as names, even if individuals wish to withhold it. This is because reporting such information "respects the individuals" (J5) and "involves a series of public interest issues, such as truth seeking and accountability." (J6) In summary, within the framework of journalistic values, the public's right to know takes precedence over the victim's right to privacy in determining newsworthiness.

Moreover, the constructiveness of a report must give way to its timeliness in terms of its news value. The public criticized *People* for rushing reports and contributing nothing to rescue efforts. Journalists, however, countered that, "haste" was not a flaw but a reflection of "the principle of timeliness" (J7). In China, the media's pursuit of speed is also due to a race against "news censorship" (J8). When an incident first breaks, government response is often slow, giving media a certain time window to make news. However, once government intervenes, it restricts the scope of topics covered.

Recalling classic quotes and reports. Journalists also recurrently recalled classic quotes and reports to affirm the ethical value of disaster reporting. One often-cited source was Zhu Xuedong's 2015 article, "Coverage of the Victims Has Become an Effort to Reach the Truth of Disasters," which emphasized journalism's responsibility to uncover truths obscured by official narratives. Zhu wrote, "Coverage of the victims is no longer just a traditional remembrance of the lives lost but has also become an endeavor for journalists to break through the resistance and present readers with the partial truth of the disaster as much as possible. This heavy responsibility is what distinguishes real Chinese-style disaster reporting." Journalists cited this passage to reinforce the legitimacy of *People's* report, arguing that it transformed abstract death tolls into tangible grief and, in doing so, encouraged public reflection on the causes of the tragedy (J9).

Furthermore, prominent journalists' claims and landmark disaster reports were frequently referenced during moments of peak criticism. In defending their professional integrity, journalists recalled classic quotes such as "Not reporting on the victims is the biggest ethical problem" (J11) and "There is no reason that should stop journalists from going to the scene" (J12).

Journalists also reposted widely admired reports, including "The Train That Never Arrived" (*China Youth Daily*) and "The Yichun Air Crash: A Journey of Disasters and Songs of Life" (*Sanlian Lifeweek*), evoking nostalgia for journalism's so-called "golden age." These gestures served multiple purposes: reinforcing professional values, invoking the collective memory, fostering community solidarity, and reaffirming journalism's jurisdiction in the face of moralized public criticism.

Countering malicious criticism. Unlike the more defensive or nostalgic tactics described above, this approach aims to directly reassert journalistic authority by drawing a firm line between professionals and non-professionals. Journalists emphasized that the public lacks the necessary expertise to evaluate reporting ethics, arguing that many critiques were driven by emotion rather than informed understanding. As one journalist noted, "People use harsh attacks to express what they perceive as virtue, yet they don't have a basic understanding of how the media work" (J13). A former *People* reporter similarly asked, "If the public understood how professional media operate, would they still issue *ChiRenxueMantou* judgments? Would they be more cautious in evaluating the media's value while grieving?" (J14). These assertions served to re-establish journalistic jurisdiction by excluding morally driven media criticism.

Journalists also pushed back by critiquing online audiences' behavior after the crash to undermine the legitimacy of digital press criticism. Some noted that while audiences accused journalists of causing secondary trauma, they, themselves, were trolling victims' families—accusing them of using grief for attention or not appearing sufficiently mournful (J15). Journalists framed such online criticism, though cloaked in righteousness, as a tool of denigration and demonization, rather than sincere concern (J16).

They also pointed to a growing climate of hostility toward the press, where the audience would "subconsciously criticize or even stigmatize journalism" (J17). This created a paradox: The media were simultaneously condemned for failing in their duties and for seeking attention when they tried to fulfill them. Against this backdrop of sustained hostility, the MU5735 controversy became a moment for journalists to voice long-held grievances and reclaim their professional legitimacy.

Discussion and conclusion

By analyzing the discursive interactions triggered by *People's* report, this study identifies three recurring types of criticism when journalism is accused of *ChiRenxueMantou*. In response, journalists employ a range of strategies to defend their jurisdiction over what to report, how to report it, and how such reporting should be judged.

As a form of Chinese digital press criticism, *ChiRenxueMantou* shares key features with global anti-media discourses. First, similar to its counterparts elsewhere (Kim &

Shin, 2025), it surpasses targeting individual journalists to challenge journalism. What begins as criticism of specific content soon detaches from the report, itself, shifting to accusations about journalism's motives and resurfacing its controversial past. In doing so, public critique intensifies into a sweeping condemnation of Chinese journalism as unethical and untrustworthy.

Second, digital press criticism does not serve as an opportunity to promote mutual understanding between the public and journalism. Instead, it contributes to the deterioration of their relationship, similar to the *giraegi* discourse in South Korea (Shin et al., 2021). The public accuses journalism of *ChiRenxueMantou*, while journalists view the public as irrational and ignorant, reflecting a reconsideration of the journalism–audience relationship (Lewis et al., 2020). In contrast to the once-optimistic view of public participation as a driver of journalistic innovation, journalism now confronts the phenomenon of “dark participation”: damaging media reputations and launching hate campaigns against journalism (Quandt, 2018).

Third, facing massive digital press criticism, most news organizations remain silent (Nechushtai, 2023; Waisbord, 2023). Existing studies have offered multiple explanations for this, the most common being that leaders of media organizations still have a vague and ambiguous understanding of the issue (Malcorps et al., 2023). Contrary to their international counterparts, Chinese news organizations' silence is less about confusion and more about constraint. As discussed above, massive online criticism exerts public pressure that is quickly internalized and transmitted through government oversight mechanisms. This indirect yet powerful form of pressure discourages media organizations from publicly defending their journalists and news coverage. In such a climate, institutional silence serves as a risk-avoidance tactic, leaving unprotected individual journalists to navigate challenges alone. This exposes the fragmented and vulnerable state of professional solidarity in Chinese journalism.

Our findings extend Abbott's (1988) theory of professional jurisdiction by proposing the concept of moral–affective jurisdiction inside a non-Western and increasingly affective digital media environment. This study bridges this gap by integrating shared concerns across professional authority, affective news discourse, and digital press criticism. A moral–affective dimension of jurisdictional contestation reminds us that journalism's legitimacy is increasingly judged not solely by factual accuracy or institutional roles but by its perceived moral and emotional alignment with public sentiment.

This shift marks a fundamental reconfiguration of jurisdictional struggle, from a contest over professional expertise to one over moral legitimacy. This challenge to moral–affective jurisdiction exposes journalism to universal risks (Cheruiyot, 2024), with far-reaching consequences for the future of Chinese journalism. To some degree, journalists are no longer perceived as “watchdogs” but as “moral defendants.” Almost every report—particularly on disasters, death, or trauma—becomes a test of their ethical standing. To avoid public condemnation and potential repercussions, journalists may preemptively retreat from contentious topics and adopt safer, less impactful editorial strategies (Hussain et al., 2025; Ivask, 2025). Such patterns risk deepening the chilling effect already constraining Chinese journalism.

Moreover, we should highlight a critical but yet to be thoroughly examined dimension of digital press criticism: Each journalistic compromise made under public pressure risks becoming part of journalism's enduring “dirty past.” In the social media era,

journalism's concessions are remembered and stored in digital memories, ready to be activated and recirculated in future controversies to delegitimize the press. As demonstrated by this study, online audiences frequently invoke the *Liu Xuezhou* case to challenge journalists' conscience, and reports such as *People's* MU5735 coverage are already being reframed as emblematic of *ChiRenxueMantou*. This recursion reveals that compromise is not a path to increasing public credibility but a mechanism that entrenches journalism in a vicious cycle of self-defense, historical reproach, and diminishing public trust. We identify this dynamic as a key vulnerability of Chinese journalism in a turbulent digital media environment.

While no consensus exists on addressing digital press criticism and mob censorship (Zelizer, 2023), we suggest that Chinese journalism can navigate these challenges through three strategies. First, fostering internal solidarity provides emotional and professional support when public defenses fail (Nechushtai, 2023). Second, redirecting engagement from polarized social media platforms to reflective, investigative-oriented platforms (e.g. podcasts) would better reach moderate audiences and rebuild trust (Lindgren, 2022; Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022). Finally, journalists may consider co-constructing professional jurisdiction with an informed and empathetic public by selectively outsourcing or sharing its jurisdiction. One way to achieve this is through formats that foreground the voices of those directly affected, such as presenting facts through first-person testimonies. Healthy journalism, we argue, requires not only moral and affective support from society but also a balanced and pluralistic environment—one where moral-emotional judgments are present but not easily weaponized or abused.

Admittedly, this article represents only a preliminary exploration of these complex issues. Future studies could longitudinally examine the evolving relationships between angry online audiences, digital platforms, and journalism, and further trace mechanisms propelling waves of digital press criticism.

Notes

1. Details regarding the *Jiang Ge* case and *Liu Xuezhou* case are available on OSF via the following link: https://osf.io/qwav7/?view_only=6e1aed06e7ab48649c51efab740715f9
2. *Fangcang* are mobile cabin hospitals and temporary medical facilities used for isolating and treating patients infected with COVID-19.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest.

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