Critical analysis of a text: 2

# Text (reference details)

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| Tong, J (2009) Press self-censorship in China: a case study in the transformation of discourse, *Discourse and Society* 20, 5: 593-612 |

**1. What review question am I asking of this text?**

(e.g. What is my central question? Why select this text? Does the Critical Analysis of this text fit into my investigation with a wider focus? What is my constructive purpose in undertaking a Critical Analysis of this text?)

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| *My central research question is: How does the world media present politically sensitive stories?*  *My review question is: What factors contribute to the representation of politically sensitive stories in the world’s media?*  *This paper relates only to China, but it might have implications for other countries where there is news censorship. It also relates only to newspaper reporting, where the choice of words is paramount, compared to media with audio and visual components.* |

**2. How and why are the authors making this contribution?**

a. What type of literature is this (e.g. Theoretical, research, practice, policy? Are there links with other types of literature?)

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| *This is research literature, because it reports a systematic investigation of how certain practices in journalism affect the story that is told. It is not practice literature because the paper does not aim to make recommendations for good practice, only to describe practice without making claims about what is good and bad.* |

b. How clear is it which intellectual project the authors are undertaking? (e.g. Knowledge-for-understanding, knowledge-for-critical evaluation, knowledge-for-action, training?)

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| *The author’s intellectual project is to develop knowledge-for-understanding, because the author’s stated intention is to examine journalism practice in a particular context, leading to an explanation of how it happens and what the effect is. Although the author could have taken a position on whether current practice is a good or bad thing, and whether it should continue or be changed, she does not do so. She is not, therefore, pursuing critical evaluation or knowledge-for-action.* |

c. How is the intellectual project reflected in the authors’ mode of working? (e.g. A social science or a practical orientation? Choice of methodology and methods? An interest in understanding or in improving practice?)

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| *The author’s focus on understanding is indicated by the fact that she has gathered evidence that enables her to track processes in a relatively impartial way, including progressive drafts of texts and information from interviews and observation. She is trying to stand back and see what is there. She draws on discourse analysis as her mode of analysis.* |

d. What value stance is adopted towards the practice or policy investigated? (e.g. Relatively impartial, critical, positive, unclear? What assumptions are made about the possibility of improvement? Whose practice or policy is the focus of interest?)

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| *The author projects a positive view of the practice of self-censorship. By suggesting that it enables the Chinese newspapers to report more, and so to gain ground in providing information and views closer to those of the ordinary people, she indicates that she believes doing so is a good thing. Had she been in favour of government censorship, she could have used her insights about the SMD newsroom practice of creating layers of meaning to show how the requirements of the government are subverted by clever editors, who should be stopped. She doesn’t do that.*  *The author seems to believe:*  *I. freedom of the press is desirable*  *II. the journalists reporting the view of the ordinary people have the most desirable version of the story and all the subsequent edits are compromises*  *III. the SMD is a better paper than the DD, because it does not concede to the government line so completely.*  *She suggests that self-censorship at its best (SMD) is acceptable or even desirable in the circumstances because it successfully subverts aspects of the baseline national censorship.* |

e. How does the sort of intellectual project being undertaken affect the research questions addressed? (e.g. Investigation of what happens? What is wrong? How well a particular policy or intervention works in practice?)

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| *Because of her focus on knowledge-for-understanding, the author asks research questions whose answers promise an explanation of what happens and why: how ‘newspaper discourse gets changed’, and how ‘conflicts of interest between journalists and newsrooms’ are resolved through ‘newsrooms employ[ing] self-censorship to minimize political risks while maximizing public interest’ (p.593).* |

f. How does the sort of intellectual project being undertaken affect the place of theory? (e.g. Is the investigation informed by theory? Generating theory? Atheoretical? Developing social science theory or a practical theory?)

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| *The author does refer to some theoretical concepts, including Gramsci’s ‘war of position’, Van Dijk’s views on the role of the ‘unsaid’ and Fairclough’s ‘competition for power over media discourse’ (p.594). But she does not explain them or demonstrate how her case relates to them. This means she is potentially informed by theory, but does not use it to promote an understanding of her data directly.* |

g. How does the authors’ target audience affect the reporting of research? (e.g. Do the authors assume academic knowledge of methods? Criticize policy? Offer recommendations for action?)

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| *The author does not directly indicate who her target audience is. I assume her primary readership is academic social scientists, particularly those with an interest in the media. She uses a critical discourse analysis approach, but her accounts should be accessible to a wide range of academic readers. Being written for an English-speaking audience, there is only limited inclusion of the original Chinese language text, so readers are reliant on the accuracy of her translation of them. As the journal is published in the west, I infer she is trying to inform non-Chinese scholars about media practices in China, rather than directly addressing a Chinese readership.* |

**3. What is being claimed that is relevant to answering my review question?**

a. What are the main kinds of knowledge claim that the authors are making? (e.g. Theoretical knowledge, research knowledge, practice knowledge?)

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| *The main claims are to research knowledge, because she is engaged in knowledge-for-understanding, in the context of research literature. The claims are not to practice knowledge because she was not herself one of the journalists or editors involved in this study. So she is describing their practice from the outside as an observer, not from the inside. [However, her academic website at Leicester University indicates that she did work as a journalist before becoming an academic].* |

b. Excluding aspects that are obviously not relevant to the review question, what is the content of each of the main claims to knowledge and of the overall argument? (e.g. What, in a sentence, is being argued? What are the three to five most significant claims that encompass much of the relevant detail? Are there key prescriptions for improving policy or practice?)

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| *The author’s main claim relating to my review question is that three interacting factors contribute to these representations in the Chinese newspaper media:*  *a) The prevailing national government censorship of information, particularly ‘topics regarded as a threat to national stability’ including ‘criticism of Party leaders, human rights abuses and riots [and] severe accidents or disasters’ (p.595).*  *b) The desire and commitment of the new generation of Chinese journalists ‘more to represent the voice of the underprivileged social groups and depict the whole of the events, instead of broadcasting the government’s voice and following the official account’ (p.608).*  *c) The role of the newsroom in mediating between (a) and (b) by redrafting the journalists’ reports, so as to ‘take account of the journalist’s and Editor’s desire to practise professional journalism and to maintain the public interest’ while ‘minimizing possible political risks and prioritizing private interests’ (p.609-10).* |

c. How clear are the authors’ claims and overall argument? (e.g. Stated in an abstract, introduction or conclusion? Unclear?)

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| *The most general claims are clearly stated in the abstract, though the author also refers there to Gramsci’s ‘war of position’, which she does not actually develop as an idea in the paper (she refers twice more to how the situation she explores ‘can be described in terms of Gramsci’s ‘war of position’’ (p.610), but doesn’t explain what this means. So this claim is rather unclear. Her introduction is very similar to the abstract. Her concluding remarks do offer some summary of the claims, but primarily comment on them. There are, therefore, some aspects of the main claims that can be found only by reading the full text.* |

d. How consistent are the authors’ claims with each other? (e.g. Do all claims fit together in supporting an argument? Do any claims contradict each other?)

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| *The author’s claims are consistent in telling a particular story. However, there are some instances where inconsistency may be present. For example, she claims that the journalists are telling the story of the people, and that they are committed to professional journalism, in telling the true story. However, she does not consider how telling only one side of the story might be unprofessional because it is not impartial. Indeed the journalists seem sometimes to be giving their own opinion, rather than reporting the news, e.g. the quotes beneath example 8, p.605, which she interprets as the journalist ‘[writing] the report from the position of the people instead of the government’, even though it is presented as a personal comment.* |

**4. How certain and generalized are the authors’ claims?**

a. With what degree of certainty do the authors make their claims? (e.g. Do they indicate tentativeness? Qualify their claims by acknowledging limitations of their evidence? Acknowledge others’ counter-evidence? Acknowledge that the situation may have changed since data collection?)

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| *The author writes with a relatively high degree of certainty.*  *i) In her initial accounts of the incidents (p.596-7), she tells a clear and confident story about what actually happened (e.g. ‘the [original] report identifies the real triggers of the riot’ (p.598). She does not, however, indicate how she can be so sure that this is the true version of events. In a way, it doesn’t matter because she is focused on how the story changes through the editing process. However she could have signalled less certainty by presenting these initial stories as ‘according to the first, presumably most open, journalist’s report’. After all, the journalists weren’t present when the original incident occurred, so it depends on whom they spoke to, and on how attitudes and assumptions of the interviewed people might affect their telling of the story. The journalist’s own awareness of this possibility is signalled by the way the cause of the riot is introduced in the bold passage in Example 3, p.600.*  *ii) In presenting the case for using critical discourse analysis (CDA), she lays out the processes by which CDA is undertaken, but does not concede that there is a measure of subjectivity in the interpretation of text, particularly subtle aspects of meaning.* |

b. How generalized are the authors’ claims – to what range of phenomena are they claimed to apply? (e.g. The specific context from which the claims were derived? Other similar contexts? A national system? A culture? Universal? Is the degree of generalization implicit? Unspecified?)

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| *The author’s research relates only to the practices of two newspapers. However, she uses these cases to generalize about Chinese newsrooms as a whole: ‘As a result of this analysis it is argued that self-censorship functions as a mechanism for negotiating power relations in Chinese newsrooms’ (p.594). She goes on to make several further claims about Chinese newsrooms in general, though indicating that the degree to which a practice exists ‘depends on the priorities of newspapers’ (p.594).* |

**5. How adequate is the backing for these claims?**

a. How transparent are any sources used to back the claims? (e.g. Is there any statement of the basis for assertions? Are sources adequately specified?)

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| *There is clear backing from her specific data sources for the related claims. The author indicates what sources she has used in the study, but she doesn’t always attribute specific claims to particular sources (see below).* |

b. What, if any, range of sources is used to back the claims? (e.g. First-hand experience? The authors’ own practice knowledge or research? Literature about others’ practice knowledge or research? Literature about reviews of practice knowledge or research? Literature about others’ polemic? Is the range of sources adequate?)

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| *The main sources used are the successive drafts of the texts and the final published version, in one instance incorporating a photograph. She also draws on information from interviews with journalists and editors, though this is not explicitly presented as a data source. In addition, she draws on her own observation of practices, and she may also be using her previous experience as a journalist in China, though she does not identify this experience as a source for her claims.* |

c. If claims are at least partly based on the authors’ own research, how robust is the evidence? (e.g. Are there methodological limitations or flaws in the methods employed? Do the methods include the cross-checking or ‘triangulation’ of accounts? What is the sample size and is it large enough to support the claims being made? Is there an adequately detailed account of data collection and analysis? Is there a summary of all data that is reported?)

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| *The evidence seems implicitly robust, as there are indications that a careful study was carried out. However, the data drawn upon is rather underspecified, so it is difficult for the reader to be sure how robust the evidence is.*  *In the first account (DD reporting the porter riot) several examples are given to back the claims. However, the author’s discussion of the SMD coverage of the Honda riot does not have any examples at all, just her account of what the editors did to the story. If there was a space problem in the paper, she could have referred the reader to the part of her PhD thesis where this example is discussed, since I assume there is more detail there.*  *In some cases the backing is only implicit. For example, ‘The Editor-in-Chief deleted a lot of words and paragraphs, which he regarded as being politically dangerous in order to make the report safer’ (p.605). She says in a note at the end of the paper that her research was supplemented by interviews, but she does not provide a quote from the Editor to support the claim here. Another example is ‘The on-duty Editor-in-Chief, however, realized the angle, disagreed with the position of the headline, and believed the title should be from the government’s point of view’ (p.606). This claim of the Editor’s beliefs is not warranted with any evidence, so we do not know if it is based on data from her interviews, or is just her opinion. An indication that she did have such evidence is in her account (top of page 607), where she notes that two editors kept speaking on the phone about the headline. This suggests she had spoken to at least one of the people involved.* |

d. Are sources of backing for claims consistent with the degree of certainty and the degree of generalization? (e.g. Is there sufficient evidence to support claims made with a high degree of certainty? Is there sufficient evidence from other contexts to support claims entailing extensive generalization?)

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| *Overall, the explicit backing for claims is not fully consistent with the degree of certainty or the degree of generalization. It is not clear that the sources she takes to be entirely reliable in presenting the ‘facts’ could really be that reliable – e.g. journalists saying what happened in an incident, when they were not there. Also, I cannot be entirely sure that those interviewed told the author everything about the way the text was put together (e.g. an editor who wants to express a message about the process of self-censorship might not mention that some of the reporters are biased in their coverage, so that some of the changes made are actually to ensure better journalism, not just to dampen down ‘the truth’).* |

**6. How effectively does any theoretical orientation link with these claims?**

a. How explicit are the authors about any theoretical orientation or conceptual framework? (e.g. Is there a conceptual framework guiding the data collection? Is a conceptual framework selected after the data collection to guide analysis? Is there a largely implicit theoretical orientation?)

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| *The author is not sufficiently explicit about her theoretical orientation or conceptual framework. She alludes to three theoretical notions (Fairclough’s, Gramsci’s and Van Dijk’s) but none are developed in the paper, so it is not possible to tell how they relate to her work.* |

b. What assumptions does any explicit or implicit theoretical orientation make that may affect the authors’ claims? (e.g. Does a particular perspective focus attention on some aspects and under-emphasize others? If more than one perspective is used, how coherently do the different perspectives relate to each other?)

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| *It is not possible to judge this matter, because too little information is given about the theories. For instance, there are mentions of power as a significant dynamic. But as they are not strongly developed at an explicit theoretical level, it is not possible to establish how this theoretical orientation affects the claims.* |

c. What are the key concepts underpinning any explicit or implicit theoretical orientation? (e.g. Are they listed? Are they stipulatively defined? Are concepts mutually compatible? Is the use of concepts consistent? Is the use of concepts congruent with others’ use of the same concepts?)

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| *The concept ‘war of position’ (Gramsci), and allusions to Van Dijk’s and Fairclough’s work are given, but not defined/explained, so I cannot judge whether any of the concepts associated with these ideas underpin the claims in the paper.* |

d. How convincing are any diagrams presenting relationships between concepts? (e.g. Is the relationship between components clear? Are links hierarchical? Causal? Sequential? Is the purpose and direction of arrows convincing?)

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| *Not applicable – no theoretical diagram is provided as no theorization of power or power relations is attempted* |

e. Do the authors justify their choice of theoretical orientation and if so, how? (e.g. Reference to empirical evidence suggesting that the theorization captures an important feature of the phenomenon? Reference to landmark texts adopting this orientation?)

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| *The author does not justify the choice of any theoretical orientation, despite construing the production of media discourse as a ‘site of power contest’ (p594)* |

**7. To what extent does any value stance adopted affect claims?**

a. How explicit are the authors about any value stance connected with the phenomena? (e.g. A relatively impartial, critical or positive stance? Is this stance informed by a particular ideology? Is it adopted before or after data collection?)

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| *The author is not explicit about her value stance. However, without certain values about the importance of the ‘facts’ (see 2d above) she probably would not have researched this topic at all. Furthermore, it is implicit in her account that self-censorship is a good thing.*  *Her claims reflect her values through the use of expressions like ‘real triggers’ (p.598) - see 4a above. She may assume that her values do not need defending because they are widely shared Western liberal values.* |

b. How might any explicit or implicit value stance adopted by the authors be affecting their claims? (e.g. Have they pre-judged the phenomena discussed? Are they biased? Is it legitimate for the authors to adopt their particular value stance? Have they over-emphasized some aspects of the phenomenon while under-emphasizing others?)

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| *The author’s implicit value stance is likely to have influenced the examples she selected for her analysis and report. She seems to have been looking for the clearest examples of what she considers to be going on: a true story from a journalist being modified to accommodate the requirements of publication in a censored environment.*  *The author’s interpretation of the entire operation she witnessed and heard about in interviews could be influenced by her own beliefs about the journalists being able to access the true facts. She interprets all discrepancies from the original story as compromises to the truth, rather than considering that they may reflect valid alternative subjective perceptions of the truth. Her value stance is a legitimate one, but more acknowledgement of it would have helped the reader to identify where the account is most subjective.* |

**8. To what extent are claims supported or challenged by others’ work?**

a. Do the authors relate their claims to others’ work? (e.g. Do the authors refer to others’ published evidence, theoretical orientations or value stances to support their claims? Do they acknowledge others’ counter-evidence?)

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| *Little support is offered from others’ work, which is cited only to provide backing for claims about the general context of the work (e.g. p. 594), i.e. the nature of the Chinese media*. |

b. If the authors use evidence from others’ work to support their claims, how robust is it? (e.g. As for 5(c).)

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| *It is not clear exactly how the cited literature is intended to warrant the claims made, so there is no way to judge how robust it is without reading the original sources. In relation to my review question, the most useful references to follow up might be for works relating to theoretical concepts and perspectives. This is because the theoretical concepts she cites (see 2f above) may have a wider relevance that includes my own study.*  *Following up Gramsci’s notion of ‘war of position’ may be challenging, in that the reference provided by the author is to a reader of Gramsci’s work, with no indication of which specific publication(s) deal with this concept. It would have been more helpful to have a direct reference to a particular research paper or book.* |

c. Is there any evidence from others’ work (including work you know, but the authors do not mention) that challenges the authors’ claims and, if so, how robust is it? (e.g. Is there relevant research or practice literature? Check any as for 5(c).)

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| *The author mentions no other evidence. But I am aware that much theoretical literature on critical discourse analysis (including Fairclough 1989) reflects is the assumption that all experience of the social world is mediated through language. If so, no producer of any text can claim authoritatively to have written a ‘true’ account. This assumption would challenge the author’s view that the journalists’ original account of the incidents she discusses had more validity than the edited versions.* |

**9. To what extent are claims consistent with my experience?**

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| *I have observed in entirely different contexts (academic ones) how texts are progressively edited to make them more appropriate for their subtle cultural/political contexts. However, my general interpretation there has been that the editors are primarily displaying writing skills and astuteness that are superior to those of the original text writer, who is relatively inexperienced. This is partly what the author implies, in that the editors are indirectly protecting their journalists from possible backlashes that could affect their career.*  *One difference is that in the contexts I know, it is part of the development of writers to learn how to craft their texts more expertly in relation to their contexts. In contrast, the author here implies that journalists are not expected to, do not want to, and (she feels) should not, ‘compromise’ their accounts by engaging in their own ‘self-censorship’. I’d be interested to think more about whether these two situations really are different or just versions of the same thing. This difference in experience could help me recognize where my own knowledge and value stance influence how I interpret the claims I read about.* |

**10. What is my summary evaluation of the text in relation to my review question?**

a. How convincing are the authors’ claims and why?

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| *Overall, the claims relevant to my review question (What factors contribute to the representation of politically sensitive stories in the world’s media?) are fairly convincing for the context of China. They present self-censorship as a significant contributor to how politically sensitive stories can be reported, despite censorship, in that country. They depict a plausible strategy by which journalistic freedom is maximized by the newspapers through taking action to prevent direct confrontation with the censoring authorities. Her claims are most convincing when directly backed by text evidence. Given that press censorship is applied at a national level in China, the author’s generalization to other media organizations in that country are convincing. (The author does not generalize to other countries, though I am aware that national-level press censorship does apply in some of them. So her claims might apply, at a high level of abstraction, elsewhere in the world. But I would need empirical evidence from these contexts to confirm this.)* |

b. How, if at all, could the authors have provided stronger backing for their claims?

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| *Quotes from editors and journalists would have strengthened the account, so that it was possible, as a reader, to make my own judgement about whether or not the claims made are adequately warranted. This was a particularly applicable in relation to the author’s evident value stance, which could influence her interpretation of information.* |