Instructional text for critical analysis no 2 (Tong)

# Summary

The paper analyzed here presents evidence of how two Chinese newspapers apply self-censorship to manage the conflict between the implicit criticism of government in journalists’ initial reports of politically sensitive news events and the need to avoid transgressing the censorship rules in China. The author claims that self-censorship actually creates press freedoms that the newspapers would not otherwise have.

The exercise begins with the completion of a Critical Analysis of this academic journal article, focused on a review question that is provided. For reference, we supply our own completed Critical Analysis (carried out using the template), together with a brief commentary. The next part of the exercise homes in on the question of how the author’s value stance can affect the claims made, and how a critical reader can respond productively after noticing a strong value stance. This activity helps in two ways. Firstly it draws attention to the need to think, as a reader, about what it is reasonable to expect of an author of different kinds of texts. Secondly, it provides useful hints for how to report one’s own research, by understanding and managing the effects of one’s value stance.

# Part one instructions

Read the paper by Tong and complete a Critical Analysis using the template, to answer the review question: ‘What factors contribute to the representation of politically sensitive stories in the world’s media?’

## Commentary on part 1

Compare your completed Critical Analysis with ours. It will not be identical, of course, because we will all interpret things a little differently.

We stated not only the review question but also a central question that contextualized it. Obviously yours, if you gave one, would not be the same, and we didn’t ask you to provide one. However, it is useful to think about the relationship between the central question you aim to answer in your entire dissertation and the various types of more narrowly focused questions that can be used to answer it. Review questions, of which there will probably be several covered in the literature review parts of the dissertation, are the means of answering aspects of the central question by looking at what others have done. In contrast, research questions will be used as the focus for your own empirical study.

The review question for this exercise reflects the usual situation, whereby most of the reading one does is only partly relevant to what one wants to know. In this case, the match is quite good, simply narrower, in that the paper only covers two newspapers in China.

It is worth considering whether it would be easier, or more difficult, to use this paper to answer the different review question ‘How do Chinese newspapers self-censor in order to ensure important news stories can reach the public?’ The match would be so close that it could be difficult to maintain distance, and identify opportunities for critical evaluation. There might also not be any other papers to review for such a specific question, making it hard to compare and contrast claims from different researchers. Since, as critical literature reviewers, we can choose our own review questions, it is a good idea to think carefully about how to position those questions relative to the literature available – partial matches can be more effective in developing an insightful review, because they make possible opportunities for generalization beyond whatever contexts authors studied.

Note our comment in square brackets in the response to Critical Review Question 3, sub-question a. The paper itself does not provide any indication that the author has worked as a journalist herself. However, we found her webpage (she had changed university since the publication of the paper) and it indicates that she was a journalist in China before becoming an academic. This enables us to raise the question of how her professional experience has contributed to her account in this paper. Were there certain things she knew to be part of the self-censoring practice but could not evidence from within the data she had in this project? Are any of her claims influenced by her accumulated professional experience, rather from the data itself? If so, does this matter? It is legitimate for a critical reader to look for additional information that helps with the interpretation of an author’s paper – the most common example is finding out what other papers and books the author has written.

In proceeding with the Critical Analysis, our responses gradually revealed a tension that we perceive throughout the paper between two value stances founded on the author’s descriptive and value assumptions. The style of the author is generally descriptive, apparently reflecting her assumptions about how the world is. We interpret her to be pursuing a knowledge-for-understanding intellectual project to explain how the process of self-censorship operates. But her account also reflects certain normative beliefs (concerning what is right and wrong about the phenomenon she is investigating), reflecting her value assumptions (about how the social world should be). We feel that these beliefs could be influencing how she interprets the evidence (though they may not do so). See our responses to:

 Critical Analysis Question 2, sub-question d

 Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-questions b, d

 Critical Analysis Question 7, sub-questions a, b

 Critical Analysis Question 8, sub-question c

This finding from our Critical Analysis raises an interesting issue, because her value stance is consistent with dominant beliefs about the freedom of the press in the western context where she is working – as an academic based in the United Kingdom. She clearly believes that the press should have the freedom to convey information to the public, and that the views of the relatively silent and powerless majority are an important part of what should be reported.

# Part two instructions

Part 2 of this exercise develops further the theme of how authors’ value stances are handled by the critical reader. It considers how to deal with value stances identified in an author’s work. Having identified a strong value stance, it is tempting, as a critical reader, to dismiss the author’s claims as potentially invalid, or, if we share the values, to be under-critical. However, we all have values, and so we need a more sensitive and subtle approach as readers, to try and evaluate whether these values actually do have any real impact on what is being claimed, and if so, what and whether it matters.

For example, research into the sexual abuse of children would seem almost inhuman if it did not include evidence of the researcher’s value stance regarding the unacceptability of the practice. We would not find it objectionable if the evidence were sometimes interpreted in ways that indicated the author’s negative attitude (e.g. describing a perpetrator’s attitude as ‘alarmingly’ nonchalant).

We can imagine value stances as positioned along a (subjective) continuum, as below:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Not at all acceptable: no one should think this | A view it would be difficult to defend | On balance, an unacceptable view | Neutral | On balance, an acceptable view | An easily defended view | Completely acceptable: we all think this |

Note that we will differ in where we position someone else’s value stance, because our own values influence our judgment. This fact makes it difficult to provide examples that everyone will agree with. However, we can try. We already suggested that a value stance holding that the sexual abuse of children is abhorrent and unacceptable is, in most western societies, uncontentious. We might place it at point 7 on the scale. Presumably, of course, a child abuser would not agree.

To take a different kind of example, imagine that we had two texts written by researchers into the primary school curriculum. One holds strong religious beliefs and the other does not. Both write about the place of religious worship in school activities. The one with strong religious beliefs does so with a value stance positive toward religious observance in society as a whole and schools in particular. That author might place his value stance at point 6. The other author is neither religious nor anti-religious. Her own value stance is neutral, at point 4, and she interprets the value stance of the other author as at point 5, that is, acceptable as one of several possible views. However, when critically evaluating the other author’s work, she will be concerned if the author’s value stance seems to influence how he interprets the evidence from his study. Since he himself sees his value stance as being at point 6 rather than 5, he might not consider it such a problem if he makes certain assumptions in his writing that reflect his belief in the validity of religious observance.

This example illustrates how the same issue can attract different value stances, and how the same value stance can be located in different positions on the continuum by different authors and readers. As a critical reader is it important to be as aware as possible not only of the value stance of the author and of where you think the author would locate that stance on the continuum, but also of what your own value stance is on this issue, and how that affects where you place the author’s stance.

To help you explore this further, consider the following questions, referring back as necessary to the Tong paper:

1. Assuming that Tong does have a positive value stance towards freedom of the press to convey information about what is happening to ordinary people, where, from reading her text, would you judge she locates it on the continuum?

2. What is your own view regarding this issue and where would you locate it on the continuum?

3. How does your own value stance affect your sense of where Tong’s stance should be located? You may want to re-read relevant parts of the paper – some are indicated in our completed Critical Analysis.

4. Can you think of someone you know who would respond differently to questions 2 and 3 than you did? If you can, what stance would they take and where would they locate it (remember they might hold very different values, but equally strongly). If you cannot, how does this relate to where you located your stance? (That is, is your stance located at point 7 for instance?) Moving to another possible value stance of Tong’s, in our Critical Analysis we felt we identified a belief on her part that the story gathered by a journalist at the scene was the most valid because the views of the ordinary people at the heart of an incident are most accurate (see our responses to Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-questions b and d).

5. Do you agree with our judgement of Tong’s value stance? Back up your claim with evidence from the paper.

6. How might she have distanced herself a little more from her personal values about the phenomenon she was studying (whatever you believe they are) through the presentation of her account?

7. If you separate out Tong’s claims and evidence from the recognition that she also has certain views of her own, do you think she has strengthened or weakened her case by enabling the reader to perceive her value stance? What are your reasons for your view?

## Commentary on part two

The key message from this exercise is that authors will have a value stance in relation to their material – after all, something inspired them to expend a lot of time researching the topic. As a reader, you need to identify it and judge whether it affects the account and, if so, how. You need to remember that you, as a reader, also arrive with a value position, whether relatively impartial or not, and it will affect how you interpret what you see in the account you read.

Our own value stance, when doing this critical analysis, was rather strongly towards a belief that both sides of the story must be given equal weight. It led us to claim that Tong was taking too much for granted, when she implied that her own view was not really disputable. Our value stance interacted with hers because we did not want to place hers at point 7 on the scale without good evidence – we saw it as a view that was possibly reasonable and defensible (5 or 6 on the scale) and so we expected the author to provide some justification for it in the light of other possible views.

If Tong’s value stance been more at odds with ours (e.g. if we had placed it at 1, 2 or 3 on the scale), then we would have required even more justification on her part for that value stance, because we would need more persuading.

So, it is not an issue that a research account must be criticized simply because of the value stance towards the phenomenon at hand. Rather, the job of the critical reader is to assess whether the author was aware of that value stance or not – sometimes choices of word can indicate values that the author is not conscious of – and judge how, if at all, the value stance has affected the claims and their warranting.

# Part three instructions

For the final part of this exercise, we want you to adopt a personal value stance that is different from Tong’s: in line with the one that Tong attributes to the Chinese government. That is, you believe that it is important for the stability of society that newspapers do not report incidents in which ordinary people complain against or physically attack government representatives. Therefore you believe it is necessary to impose some constraints on newspaper report contents, and you value the role of editors in toning down the excesses of their journalists.

Write the paragraph that you might include as part of a critical literature review addressing the shortcomings of Tong’s account in relation to her value stance. You might begin:

‘Interesting though Tong’s claims and evidence are, …’

Remember that every claim you make must be warranted by evidence. Only draw that evidence from Tong’s text. If you cannot find evidence to support your claim, you cannot make the claim!

When you have completed this exercise think about how this value stance affected what you wrote, and how different your account would have been if you had taken a different stance.

## Example response

Interesting though Tong’s claims and evidence are, her value stance is not impartial in relation to the priorities of journalism in a country like China*.* She refers to the pursuit of ‘political safety’ (p.609), which suggests she perceives peril in the confrontation between the journalists’ writing and the interventions of government in directing the content of newspaper reports. Her use of the terms ‘propaganda’ and ‘taboo’ in ‘violations of propaganda taboos’ (p.609) indicates that she considers government controls on newspaper output to be inappropriate and undesirable, rather than a legitimate means of maintaining an appropriate balance between information and political policy. Overall, her account reveals a value stance that is sympathetic to journalists who want to write whatever they like, even if it incites social discontent and instability. That is, she appears to favour free information over the freedom of people to live their lives in a context of clear and consistent political and social priorities.

As before, our example here may not reflect what you have written, since we all have a different approach to these tasks. You may have found, as we did, that it is rather difficult to take a strongly value laden position without infusing the text with evidence of it.

# Final comments

When you write your own research account, be sure to:

1. understand what your own value stance is and check how it affects your interpretation of the evidence and the claims you make;

2. be aware of how your writing carries explicit or implicit messages about your value stance;

3. decide whether it is appropriate to tell your reader what your value stance is, and to justify it;

4. consider how your claims and the evidence backing them up could be differently construed by someone who has a different value stance from yours: probably you can identify the main value stances that are likely to arise in opposition to yours within your target readership. What could you do to minimize the likelihood of negative interpretations of your work caused by alternative values held by your readers?