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## **Media governance and truth in the post-truth era: challenges and implications for state-controlled media markets in China / Управление СМИ и правда в эпоху постправды: проблемы и последствия для контролируемых государством медиарынков в Китае**

Го Цзыхао

ORCID: 0009-0000-8213-9791



магистр; Филологический факультет; Российский университет дружбы народов им. П. Лумумбы  
117198, Россия, г. Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 6

✉ 1032234431@rudn.ru

Булгарова Белла Ахмедовна

ORCID: 0000-0001-6005-2505



кандидат филологических наук

доцент; кафедра массовых коммуникаций; Российский университет дружбы народов им. П. Лумумбы  
117198, Россия, г. Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 6

✉ bulgarova-ba@rudn.ru

Чэнь Фэнлань

ORCID: 0009-0007-2297-6126



аспирант; филологический факультет; Российский университет дружбы народов им. П. Лумумбы  
117198, Россия, г. Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 6

✉ 1042238094@rudn.ru

Марьянович Далиборка

ORCID: 0000-0001-9244-2073



старший преподаватель; Институт русского языка; Российский университет дружбы народов им. П. Лумумбы

117198, Россия, г. Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 6

✉ marianovich\_d@pfur.ru

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**Аннотация:** Предметом данного исследования является изучение проблем государственного контроля над медиа рынками в эпоху постправды, с акцентом на то, как такой контроль влияет на общественное восприятие и распространение информации. Объект исследования определен на основе анализа двух тематических исследований — инцидента с "Крысиной головой или утиной шеей" и инцидента с "Математическим гением Цзян Пином". Это исследование подчеркивает ограничения, налагаемые государственным надзором на разнообразие и плюрализм СМИ в Китае. Применяя теорию владения СМИ, теорию формирования повестки дня и теорию публичной сферы, авторы исследования показывают, как контролируемые государством СМИ ограничивают разнообразие нарративов, сужают сферу публичного дискурса и формируют общественное восприятие, в конечном счете влияя на достоверность информации в контексте постправды. Комплексный подход в исследовании позволяет нам понять, каким образом государство контролирует информационные потоки, процесс расстановки приоритетов в общественном сознании и формирование публичной сферы в условиях постправды в Китае. Методология исследования является всеобъемлющей, она включает в себя: тематическое исследование, методы сбора данных (статистический анализ и анализ текстов), применение теоретических основ (теория владения СМИ, теория публичной сферы, теория формирования повестки дня), сравнительный анализ. Новизна данного исследования объясняется следующими факторами: применяется комплексный подход, тема исследования актуальна (свежий взгляд на проблему в китайском контексте), анализ реальных кейсов, недостаточность предыдущей исследовательской базы по данному вопросу, практическая значимость исследования (выводы исследования могут быть полезны для политиков в Китае, которые стремятся улучшить доверие населения к СМИ и сделать систему государственного информационного регулирования эффективнее). Исследование показывает, что управление государственными СМИ в Китае оказывает существенное влияние на доверие общественности к информации и ее восприятие. Государственный контроль над новостным контентом и подача однотипной информации снижают качество общественного диалога и разнообразие мнений населения. Выводы, сделанные авторами исследования, подчеркивают необходимость дальнейшего изучения механизмов управления СМИ и поиска баланса между свободой слова и государственным контролем в Китае.

**Ключевые слова:**

государственный, медиа, рынок, постправда, общественный, дискурс, информация, распространение, контроль, повествовательный

**Research background and trends**

## State-controlled media market in China

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, China's media market has experienced substantial transformation and development. This policy marked the beginning of China's economic and social modernization, leading to a rapidly expanding media industry. Within this evolving landscape, two distinct aspects of the Chinese media market have emerged: extensive government control and intervention on one side and the rise of independent media forces on the other.

In China, state-controlled media, often referred to as official media, are directly managed and guided by the government. Prominent outlets such as China Central Television (CCTV), People's Daily, and Xinhua News Agency play crucial roles in news reporting, information dissemination, and public opinion shaping. Official media serve as the propaganda apparatus of the state, with their content and perspectives heavily influenced by government agendas. As such, the state-controlled media market and official media essentially represent two sides of the same coin, with the government ensuring information consistency and stability through various means [\[2, p. 36-44\]](#).

Moreover, social media in China is subject to stringent government control and oversight. As one of the largest single-party states globally, the Chinese government indirectly manages social media through various mechanisms, including government-operated accounts on social media platforms and state-owned enterprises holding significant shares in these platforms [\[4\]](#). Consequently, news content and its presentation are tightly controlled to align with party and government policies, resulting in limitations and uniformity in news reporting. This controlled media environment raises questions about the credibility and objectivity of the media, significantly impacting the diversity of public opinion and the public's right to information [\[7\]](#).

Conversely, as China's economy grows and society evolves, the media market has also shown trends toward independent development. Since the reform and opening-up, private enterprises and civil organizations have gradually emerged, including newspapers, television stations, radio stations, and online media. These independent outlets, to some extent, operate beyond direct government control, enjoying greater editorial freedom and reporting opportunities. They actively report on social events, expose issues, and pursue the truth, becoming crucial channels for the public to obtain information, express opinions, and hold the government accountable [\[1, p. 4-6\]](#).

## Challenges and Opportunities

China's media system is predominantly state-led, with government control permeating all aspects of media operations. This control encompasses content review, propaganda direction, and information release. While the primary aim of state-controlled media is to maintain social stability and national security [\[7\]](#), such control poses challenges to the diversity of information and pluralism in the information age. Recently, the rapid development of the internet and new media has further challenged the traditional media monopoly, significantly altering the media ecosystem [\[3, p. 25-27\]](#).

Thus, China's media market consists of both government-controlled and independently developed segments. This duality and complexity provide valuable context for studying the challenges posed by state control over media markets in the post-truth era. Understanding the extent of government control, exploring the development of independent media, and

analyzing their interrelationships are crucial for comprehending the operational mechanisms, societal impacts, and developmental trends of China's media market. This understanding can support efforts to promote information transparency, maintain press freedom, and enhance public opinion oversight. Finding a balance between state control and media diversity is a critical concern for both academics and policymakers [4].

## Research Review

### 2.1 Review of Cutting-Edge Research

In recent years, significant progress has been made in the study of state-controlled media markets, information dissemination, and their impact on public opinion. Within the international academic community, numerous scholars have explored these topics, offering various theoretical perspectives and research findings [8, 9]. However, research in this area remains relatively limited within the Chinese academic sphere. This phenomenon may be attributed to multiple factors, including political and cultural influences.

Politically, academic research in mainland China is subject to certain constraints, making it challenging to thoroughly investigate sensitive topics [10]. Culturally, the traditional emphasis on authority and stability may inhibit discussions surrounding information transparency and opinion diversity [11, 5443]. Consequently, the study of information dissemination and public opinion within state-controlled media markets in China lags behind international standards. While some relevant online articles and columns exist, the overall research output remains insufficiently rich and lacks depth [12]. Therefore, there is a pressing need for further academic exploration of issues related to public opinion and information transparency within state-controlled media markets in China.

### 2.2 Research Theme and Key Questions

This study focuses on the themes of information dissemination and public opinion within the state-controlled media market in China. In this context, we will concentrate on the degree and methods of government control over media, the development of independent media, and the relationship and interaction between government control and public opinion. Specifically, we will conduct an in-depth analysis of two cases: the "Rat Head or Duck Neck" incident and the "Math Genius Jiang Ping" event. Through these cases, we aim to explore how government control influences media content presentation, public responses to information, and challenges to official narratives. These issues are crucial for understanding the operational mechanisms, social impact, and development trends of the Chinese media market, providing theoretical and practical support for promoting information transparency, safeguarding press freedom, and enhancing public opinion supervision.

## Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

#### Research Framework

This study adopts a case analysis method, selecting two cases to investigate issues of pluralism and media diversity within China's state-controlled media market. The cases include the "Rat Head or Duck Neck" incident and the "Math Genius Jiang Ping" incident. These cases encompass different types of events and media coverage, providing a comprehensive understanding of government control over the media market, the development of independent media, and the relationship between the two.

### **3.2 Application of Theoretical Frameworks**

#### **Media Ownership Theory**

Proposed by communication scholars in the 1970s, this theory explores the influence of media ownership on news reporting and content. It emphasizes the control media owners have over news content and reporting, thereby affecting the direction and content of information dissemination.

#### **Public Sphere Theory**

Developed by political scholar Jürgen Habermas, this theory analyzes the role of power, media, and democracy within the public sphere. It posits that the public sphere should form the basis of democratic politics, with the media playing a crucial role in promoting civic engagement and democratic decision-making.

#### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

Proposed by American communication scholars Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, this theory studies how media influence public perception and attention by selecting and emphasizing certain issues. It asserts that media agenda-setting significantly impacts public awareness and focus on various issues.

### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

Data collection will combine qualitative and quantitative methods. We will employ text analysis to gather relevant media reports, social media comments, and public opinion responses. By comparing different media's angles and stances on the same events, as well as the differences in reporting content, we aim to uncover the stories and viewpoints behind the events. Additionally, we will use statistical analysis methods to analyze quantitative data, obtaining deeper conclusions and insights.

## **Case Analysis**

### **4.1 The "Rat Head or Duck Neck"**

#### **4.1.1 Background Introduction**

The "Rat Head or Duck Neck" incident at Jiangxi Vocational and Technical College was a significant event involving food safety and public opinion oversight. It occurred in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China. The incident began on June 1, 2023, when a student discovered an unidentified object in their meal at the college cafeteria, which appeared to be a rodent's head. The student immediately questioned the cafeteria staff, who insisted that the object was a duck neck. Subsequently, the student posted a video of the incident on TikTok, sparking widespread public attention and discussion.

#### **4.1.2 Development of the Incident and Changes in Public Opinion**

Initially, the school and official media insisted that the object was a duck neck, trying to control public opinion through official channels and demanding that the student withdraw the accusation. Influential opinion leaders on official media and social media issued statements confirming that the object was a duck neck, trying to suppress the student's voice and characterize the incident as a misunderstanding. Under official pressure, the student was forced to issue a statement to "clarify" the incident and admit his mistake.

However, the discussion on social media did not stop, but instead triggered further

investigation and debate. Many netizens began to question the official explanation and put forward various assumptions and speculations. Netizens who believed that it was a rat head took a contemptuous attitude towards the official announcement and spread the scope of the incident by making MEMES through photoshopping. At the same time, a large number of social media opinion leaders with millions of fans unanimously expressed the opinion that this "foreign object" was the duck neck in the official announcement, not the rat head. Anyone who questioned or opposed the official announcement must have ulterior motives. These opinion leaders who used "patriotism" as a selling point even identified those who held opposing opinions as "foreign spies", believing that they were secretly driving the rhythm of public opinion in an attempt to undermine the government's credibility.

However, under the scrutiny and criticism of Zhang Chenliang, director of the National Geographic Multimedia Center of China, the direction of public opinion changed dramatically. Zhang Chenliang conducted an independent investigation and released a video, saying: "Without considering any external factors, the object is indeed a rat head." This authoritative voice has received widespread attention and recognition, deepening the public's doubts about the official explanation.

Under pressure from public opinion, the Jiangxi Provincial Government established a joint investigation team on June 10 to conduct an in-depth investigation of the incident. The investigation team finally confirmed that the object picked up by the students was a rat head, not a duck neck, by comparing and checking the video materials. This conclusion redefined the nature of the incident and also exposed the limitations of the official media in guiding public opinion and handling incidents.

#### **4.1.3 Analysis from the perspective of Media Ownership Theory**

In the "Rat Head or Duck Neck" incident, media ownership significantly influenced public opinion direction. Both school and official media, as primary information disseminators, were restricted by the state-controlled media market, where the Chinese government indirectly controlled social media platforms through state-owned enterprises. This ownership structure influenced the direction and content selection of media reporting, thereby shaping the formation and dissemination of public opinion.

At the incident's onset, the school authorities and official media uniformly claimed the object was a duck neck and tried to control public opinion through "official announcements" and highly recognizable official documents to maintain the school's and regulatory bodies' reputations. This reflects the authority and dominance of state media and its control over media discourse. The unified and firm stance of the school authorities and official media directly influenced the incident's public opinion trajectory and attempted to suppress the expression of alternative voices.

However, the unique nature of social media allows for greater diversity and freedom in reporting and commenting, enabling the presentation of different viewpoints and challenges to the official narrative. This diversity of voices and information flow underscores the importance of social media in China's media environment and indicates the public's pursuit of information transparency and freedom of expression.

#### **4.1.4 Analysis from the perspective of Agenda Setting Theory**

Agenda-setting played a crucial role in the "Rat Head or Duck Neck" incident. Official media attempted to set the agenda by emphasizing that the object was a duck neck, trying to downplay the incident's severity and reduce public concern and skepticism.

However, discussions on social media continued, leading to a more diversified and complex agenda. The widespread discussion and commentary on social media prompted further investigation and exploration of the incident. Many netizens began questioning the official explanation, proposing various hypotheses and speculations. These voices gradually formed a powerful public opinion force that not only influenced the incident's development but also prompted the government to re-examine the incident and take action, challenging the official media's discourse power and agenda-setting, and prompting more attention and investigation of the incident.

#### **4.1.5 Analysis from the perspective of Public Sphere Theory**

Public Sphere Theory emphasizes public participation and discourse power in social issues. In the "Rat Head or Duck Neck" incident, social media became the main platform for public opinion expression and discussion. Through social media, the public could freely express opinions, provide viewpoints, and supervise and comment on the incident, forming an open space for public opinion [\[13\]](#).

The government, through state-owned enterprises' control of social media platforms, actually shaped a particular public opinion environment within the public sphere. In this environment, official voices dominate, while individual and civil voices are suppressed and restricted. In the "Rat Head or Duck Neck" incident, official media attempted to control public opinion through reporting and commentary, urging the student to support the school's stance and cover for the school. This behavior reflects the reality of government intervention and manipulation within the public sphere, limiting public freedom of expression and the right to information. However, the questioning and criticism from individuals and civil institutions on social media broke the monopoly of public opinion, making it possible to reveal the truth of the incident.

### **4.2 The "Math Genius" Jiang Ping**

#### **4.2.1 Background Introduction**

The "Math Genius" Jiang Ping incident began on June 13, 2024, when Chinese media reported that Jiang Ping, a vocational school student, achieved impressive results in the highly competitive Alibaba Global Mathematics Competition, placing 12th worldwide in the initial round. This feat was touted by state media as a testament to China's progress in educational equality and gender parity, showcasing how opportunities in high-level mathematics are accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic status or gender. Reports highlighted Jiang Ping's achievements as an example of how students from less privileged educational backgrounds could compete on the global stage, receiving significant media praise.

However, public skepticism soon emerged. Many questioned the credibility of Jiang Ping's accomplishment, pointing to her modest academic record as evidence that something was amiss. Reports indicated that her average performance in mathematics at school included a monthly test score of 83 out of 150—far from the typical standard of top-ranked international mathematics competitors. Additionally, netizens noted the unlikelihood of a student from a vocational school competing so successfully in a field usually dominated by students from science-focused secondary schools and specialized mathematics institutions.

#### **4.2.2 Rising Public Doubts and the Theory of Teacher Impersonation**

As media coverage grew, so did suspicions. Online commentators began speculating that

Jiang's teacher, Wang Runqiu, may have impersonated her in the competition, using Jiang's ID and competition account to sit for the exam on her behalf. This theory gained traction as social media discussions raised questions about the school environment and speculated on the incentives for teachers to artificially enhance their students' achievements. Observers argued that Jiang Ping's success, if genuine, would reflect positively on her teacher and her school, both of which would benefit from recognition and potential funding opportunities for producing "outstanding talent."

The controversy prompted responses from China's academic community, with several university-level mathematics professors calling for an independent verification of Jiang Ping's achievements. They suggested that, to dispel public doubts, Jiang Ping could demonstrate her mathematical abilities in a public setting or in a live-streamed test. This suggestion was aimed at providing transparency and proving her competency, ensuring her achievements would be seen as legitimate by the broader community. However, neither the school nor Jiang Ping or the official media responded to this proposal, which only added to public concerns.

#### **4.2.3 Competition Finals and Ongoing Silence**

On June 22, 2024, amid huge public controversy, the official media reported that Jiang Ping participated in the final round of the Alibaba Global Mathematics Competition. The competition organizers announced that the final results would be released in August, a delay intended to allow time for thorough scoring and review. However, no further information has been provided as of late October 2024. Despite the expectation of an official release, there has been no announcement of Jiang's results or those of any other competitors. This ongoing silence has fueled further speculation, with some netizens noting that even other competitors have refrained from publicly discussing the results or the competition outcome.

The absence of updates from the official competition channels, coupled with the silence from official media, Jiang Ping and her school, has led to growing frustration and doubts among the public. This lack of transparency has amplified suspicions about the competition's integrity and rekindled debates on the importance of educational transparency and the need for strict verification in academic competitions.

#### **4.2.4 Analysis from the perspective of Media Ownership Theory**

In the Jiang Ping incident, media ownership and control played a crucial role in shaping the narrative surrounding her achievement. The initial wave of support from state-controlled media aimed to bolster national pride and promote gender equality, aligning with government interests in showcasing success stories from the education sector. However, the lack of transparency regarding the competition's integrity and Jiang Ping's unusual rise drew scrutiny. The situation reflects how state influence over media can both create celebratory narratives and inadvertently lead to public skepticism when facts remain obscured.

#### **4.2.5 Analysis from the perspective of Agenda Setting Theory**

Agenda-setting theory is particularly relevant in this case. Initially, the media focused on promoting Jiang Ping's achievements and the narrative of success, effectively pushing this agenda to the forefront. However, as skepticism grew, especially on social media platforms, the public began to shift the focus to questions regarding the validity of her results. The media's failure to adequately address these emerging concerns allowed alternate narratives

to proliferate, reflecting the dynamic nature of public discourse and the challenges faced by official media in controlling narratives.

#### **4.2.6 Analysis from the perspective of Public Sphere Theory**

Public sphere theory highlights the importance of open dialogue in shaping social issues. Social media became a vital space for public engagement, allowing individuals to voice their doubts about Jiang Ping's legitimacy and call for greater accountability. This online discourse has been instrumental in breaking down the monopolistic control that official narratives typically hold in state media. However, the apparent lack of response from educational authorities further indicates the challenges in facilitating a truly open public sphere, as citizens' calls for transparency have gone largely unanswered.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **5.1 Research Summary**

This study analyzed two significant events: the "Rat Head or Duck Neck" incident and the "Math Genius Jiang Ping" incident, focusing on the challenges posed by state control over media markets in the post-truth era. By examining these events through the lenses of media ownership theory, agenda-setting theory, and public sphere theory, the research revealed the roles and impacts of official media in shaping narratives, as well as the challenges and limitations they face in promoting diverse and pluralistic reporting.

#### **Issues of Diversity and Media Pluralism in a State-Controlled Media Market**

##### **Limitations Due to Media Ownership Structure**

Official media, governed by the state and a select elite, typically disseminate content that aligns with governmental policies and interests, often sidelining grassroots voices and concerns.

##### **Singularity of Agenda Setting**

While official media have a strong capacity to set agendas, their focus is frequently narrow, failing to capture the diversity and complexities of societal issues, especially in a rapidly changing information environment.

##### **Closed Public Sphere**

Although social media offers a platform for public expression, the overarching control exerted by state media constrains the openness and diversity of public discourse, limiting genuine dialogue and critique.

#### **Recommendations for Improving Media Diversity and Pluralism in a State-Controlled Media Market**

##### **Enhance Transparency and Independence in Reporting**

Official media should maintain high levels of transparency and independence when reporting public events, avoiding over-reliance on authority and official channels. Through independent investigations and multi-faceted verification, official media can enhance the credibility and authority of their reports, reducing public skepticism and distrust.

##### **Promote Openness and Diversity in the Public Sphere**

Official media should actively promote openness and diversity in the public sphere, encouraging public expression and participation in discussions. By opening up the public sphere, official media can better reflect societal diversity, enhancing their credibility and social influence.

### **Balance Agenda Setting and Public Demand**

When setting agendas, official media should fully consider societal diversity and complexity, avoiding overemphasis on individual success stories or singular values. By balancing agenda setting and public demand, official media can more comprehensively reflect societal realities, enhancing their credibility and social influence [\[7\]](#).

### **Encourage a Diversified Media Ecosystem**

Official media should support and encourage a diversified media ecosystem, strengthening cooperation and communication with social media platforms and other independent media. By fostering a diversified media ecosystem, official media can better reflect societal diversity, enhancing their credibility and social influence [\[6\]](#).

### **Improve the Quality and Professionalism of Media Personnel**

Official media should focus on improving the quality and professionalism of media personnel, ensuring they can report independently, impartially, and objectively. By enhancing the quality and professionalism of media personnel, official media can better reflect societal diversity, enhancing their credibility and social influence.

### **Strengthen the Application and Innovation of Emerging Media Technologies**

Official media should actively explore and apply emerging media technologies to enhance interactivity and engagement in their reporting. By strengthening the application and innovation of emerging media technologies, official media can better reflect societal diversity, enhancing their credibility and social influence.

### **Emphasize Media Ethics and Social Responsibility**

Official media should always adhere to media ethics and social responsibility in their reporting, ensuring fairness and objectivity. By emphasizing media ethics and social responsibility, official media can better reflect societal diversity, enhancing their credibility and social influence.

## **5.4 Future Research Directions**

Future research can further examine the following areas relevant to the findings of this study:

**Exploring Media Control Mechanisms:** Investigate specific mechanisms through which state control influences public perception and media narratives, particularly in the context of recent high-profile incidents.

**Impact on Public Trust:** Analyze how the outcomes of incidents like the "Math Genius Jiang Ping" affect public trust in official narratives and media as a whole, especially in light of the challenges posed by misinformation.

**Comparative Studies:** Conduct comparative analyses of state-controlled media practices in different countries to identify common challenges and best practices in maintaining media

integrity and diversity in the post-truth era.

By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between state control and media representation, ultimately promoting a more informed and engaged public in a challenging media landscape.

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## Результаты процедуры рецензирования статьи

В связи с политикой двойного слепого рецензирования личность рецензента не раскрывается.

Со списком рецензентов издательства можно ознакомиться [здесь](#).

Рецензируемая статья «Управление СМИ и правда в эпоху постправды: проблемы и последствия для контролируемых государством медиарынков в Китае», предлагаемая к

публикации на английском языке в журнале «Litera», несомненно является актуальной ввиду важности масмедиа в современном мире, их влияния на умы обывателей, а также тем фактом, что в последние годы в мире наблюдается процесс изменения политической полярности, выхода на лидирующие позиции ряда других государств.

Особый интерес представляет то, что в современном мире мы наблюдаем информационные войны, одним из главных инструментов которых являются различные средства массовой информации, что делает работу по изучению лингвистического аспекта применения СМИ в политических целях актуальным. Отметим, что в Китае наблюдаются две тенденции на медиарынке: обширный государственный контроль и вмешательство, с одной стороны, и рост влияния независимых СМИ - с другой.

В рецензируемой работе автор прибегает к обзору существующих исследований заявленной проблематики, а также уделяет внимание темам распространения информации и общественного мнения в рамках контролируемого

В качестве методов исследования применяются теоретический анализ литературы, медиалингвистический анализ, методы критической лингвистики и др. В статье используется также дискурс-анализ медийного текста, выявляются выразительные языковые средства, семантическое значение слов и выражений, коммуникативная направленность текста. А также были использованы качественные и количественные методы.

К сожалению, в исследовании не уточнено насколько велик сформированный языковой корпус для проведения исследования.

Представленная статья выполнена в русле современных научных подходов. Статья структурирована, состоит из введения, в котором автор обозначает цели и задачи настоящего исследования, а также приводит историческую справку о разработанности рассматриваемой научной проблематики, основной части, включающей в себя описания результатов исследования и представления выводов. В статье представлена информация о возможных перспективах исследования.

Библиография статьи насчитывает 11 источников как отечественных, так и зарубежных исследователей. К сожалению, отсутствуют ссылки на фундаментальные работы, такие как монографии, кандидатские и докторские диссертации по заявленной тематике, что могло бы усилить теоретическую значимость работы.

Высказанные замечания не являются существенными и не умаляют общее положительное впечатление от рецензируемой работы. В общем и целом, следует отметить, что статья написана простым, понятным для читателя языком. Работа является новаторской, представляющей авторское видение решения рассматриваемого вопроса. Статья, несомненно, будет полезна широкому кругу лиц: филологам, магистрантам и аспирантам профильных вузов. Практическая значимость исследования определяется возможностью применения данных статьи в курсах по лингвокультурологии, журналистики и теории дискурса. Статья «Управление СМИ и правда в эпоху постправды: проблемы и последствия для контролируемых государством медиарынков в Китае» может быть рекомендована к публикации в научном журнале из перечня ВАК.