

Internship Reflection

Ding Chang, 2019/8/29

I have taken an internship in Southern Metropolis Daily(南方都市报) in its Guangzhou headquarter from the beginning of June to the end of August for approximately 3 months. The position I took during the internship was data editor, in the product department of big data research center (南都大数据研究院-产品部). This 3-month internship have benefited me a lot in multiple aspects. Not only have I gained practical experience in data news production, but also made some first-hand observations on the current news and media environment in mainland China.

Southern Metropolis Daily has been an internationally well-known and reputable news agency in the traditional print media era and is now on its way to transform to new media. Southern Metropolis Daily big data research center is considered as the key department during the transformation since it can produce data and new media products and that can bring income. The department is collaborating with both the government officials and some commercial organizations like JD for data collection and topic selection. The main forms of projects produced by the department includes reports and news articles. The production cycle of a report is approximately several weeks, and a publication conference will be held on each report's release. During my internship, the newspaper covered topics like new economy, public policy, urban governance, intellectual property, etc.

The product department of Southern Metropolis Daily is consist of 6 journalist and one editor when I started my internship in June, and 2 fresh post-graduates joined the team as the result of Southern Newspaper Group's 2019 recruitment. Unlike some date news teams that I have heard of before, this data news team don't have members entitled as journalist, designer and programmer. Data collection and data processing are done by all journalists, and they are entailed as 'data editor'. The editor, entitled the dean of the department, is in charge of agenda setting and topic selection. Southern Metropolis Daily big data research center also contains the department of design and the department of IT, as separate department from the department of products. Data visualization and some data collection during the news production needs cooperation among the 3 departments, but the rest 2 department also provide service for other news sections.

I have taken part in the production of nine news articles and one report during my internship, and the work I have done varies from manually collecting raw data, data processing, conducting interviews, to writing the main part of an article or report. The main software we have used was excel, also occasionally use SPSS. I have also used Tableau and Adobe Illustrator I have learnt in class to help in data visualization when the design department was not on duty. I feel that both my skills in writing, interviewing and applying excel have been practiced. Although timing doesn't matter as much as in social news section for us, everyone had a rather full schedule and we try to finish the work as soon and accurate as possible. Working overtime is just a common practice, even for me as an intern. In the day of result release of Chinese Gaokao, a journalist and I were doing a piece of data news about the top-50-scorers in Guangdong with fresh data and interviews coming in from front-line journalists, and we worked from 9 till 11pm without leaving the seat. What have left me a deep impression was their dedication to data accuracy. They are willing to devote regardless of cost of time and manpower to examine and verify. Cross-checks have to be done before the publication.

Another thing benefited me a lot during the internship was the topic selection. The topic selection meeting of our department is usually held on each Monday morning after the dean is back from the whole newspaper's agenda setting meeting. Everyone in our department is required by our dean to turn in a topic relating to a daily hot news that is possible to be developed into a data news every day. While turning in the topic, we are also required to provide the data source, news point and possible visualization style. According to our dean, she believes it doesn't matter even if the topic was aborted. What matters to us is to maintain the sensitivity of news points since as data journalists we sometimes need to stick one topic for several days which might lead to the negligence of news. It's even a part of the journalists KPI, absence in topic turning in will result in the deduction in their salary. I find this method rather helpful to think of everyday news from a data journalist's point of view and try to explore more possibilities of the use of data. I still kept this habit after the internship.

In addition to my personal development, I also made some observations of current news environment of mainland China. The first is the change of income component of news agencies. Advertising is diminishing, and everyone in media is trying to find a new way out. Some newspapers even set foot in the real estate market and made a success in it. In Southern

Metropolis Daily, some revenue come from the products, that is, given topic products made by the product department. For instance, we have just written a report and made map of reading culture of the 11 cities in the China Great Bay Area, and this was a paid assignment from a culture festival held by Guangdong Culture department. The clients include commercial companies like JD, and also the government. The next thing our dean is trying to do is products in the form of credible ranking lists like Fortune Global 500. New forms of data products are arousing more and more attention than traditional news articles due to their better income-generating capacity.

The last thing I want to point out in my internship reflection is the serious self-censorship in mainland media. Personally, I used to regard Southern Metropolis Daily as a relatively unrestrained newspaper due to several famous incidents, but it seems the self-censorship is rather serious nowadays. It has influenced from the limitations on topic selection to word usage. And sometimes you have to overthink a sentence to make sure there's no space for others to overthink it. For example, a reporter can't write 'Students are standing on the playground waiting for the Gaokao oath-taking ceremony to start' on 4th of June, 2 days before Chinese Gaokao, also the date of a political event in history, since 'it can reminds some people of the students standing on the square back then'. As a result of self-censorship, some topics remained untouched, like current Hong Kong situation. And the censorship not only comes from inner department. We often get instructions from our dean, which she got from others, or even maybe instructions passed down to her. At the middle of August, we suddenly got instructions to write articles about Hong Kong. More specifically, good things about HK police and bad things about HK economy. When I raised the concerned of the possible bias from reporting on pre-set stands, others seemed to understand my point but still resigned to this kind of instructions. The reports about Hong Kong were later done efficiently since most of us stopped whatever we were doing to help.

In conclusion, my summer internship in Southern Metropolis Daily was fruitful and unforgettable. The skills I have developed there, people I met there and observations from there that made me think will continue to benefit me in my future study as a journalist student.

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