Journalism Meets Algorithms

How Chinese Students See the Future of News

This study explores how journalism students from diverse Chinese universities perceive the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms in journalism education. Drawing on 37 in-depth interviews and 11 follow-up conversations, the findings reveal a predominant narrative of a hybrid system, whereby students envision collaboration rather than competition between journalists and intelligent technologies. These imaginaries are shaped by state-driven narratives and limited transnational comparisons, reflecting a hybrid media model rooted in technological optimism and national pride. While participants recognize AI's potential to enhance efficiency and content distribution, they also raise concerns about algorithmic bias, data dependence, and ethical erosion. A central theme is the "viral-valid fallacy"—the distinction between content virality and information validity in an era of rapid information overflow. Journalism training and political affiliation mediate these views, underscoring the need for ethically grounded, interdisciplinary media education and AI-integrated approaches to journalism design.

Keywords: *Algorithmic Imaginaries, Artificial Intelligence (AI), China, Media Ethics, Digital Journalism*

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1. Introduction

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into global media ecosystems has transformed journalistic practices, ethics, and epistemologies. This integration has far-reaching implications for society and journalism because algorithmic literacy has become essential for the public to comprehend its sociopolitical and ethical consequences (Bucher 2019; Ji et al. 2024; Foà, Couraceiro, and Pinto-Martinho 2024). Journalists act as a transformative bridge between the public and AI developments and are increasingly responsible for critical and informed reporting that aligns algorithmic developments and social values (Markelius et al. 2024; Diakopoulos 2015, 2019; Broussard 2018). China is seeking AI dominance by 2030 and to establish a global alternative to liberal democracy by adopting AI as a strategic resource (Zeng 2022; Kuai 2025). The shift from traditional newscasting to AI-assisted newsroom processes, from content production to algorithmic delivery (Kevin-Alerechi et al. 2025), calls for consideration of how aspiring journalists perceive AI's functions, boundaries, and social impacts. This study explores algorithmic imaginaries among journalism students in China. Algorithmic imaginaries are defined as collectively held visions, beliefs, and expectations about the agency and cultural impact of algorithms (Natale and Ballatore 2017). The study also explores how these imaginaries interact with students' professional role visions, influencing AI-driven journalism within the nation's contested digital public sphere.

Existing literature has prioritized AI in journalism within the Western media landscape, specifically AI efficiency, risks, and bias (Diakopoulos 2019; Lewis et al. 2019). Chinese studies have focused on the integration of journalism and AI in the Chinese media landscape (Yu and Huang 2021; Kuai et al. 2022; Kuai 2025). Recent studies have analyzed journalism aspirants' attitudes toward AI, its training, and applicability (Zhu et al. 2024; Sun et al. 2024), highlighting a void in advancing understanding of algorithmic preferability in journalism in China, where media innovation is driven by imperatives to advance technological sovereignty (via Baidu ERNIE, iFlytek's models), while ensuring alignment with "cyberspace governance" frameworks (Zhang 2024; Yılmaz 2025). Journalism aspirants must address the tensions between techno-utopian ("AI as an efficiency engine") and state-formed functionalities ("AI as a propaganda amplifier") and situate their imaginaries within their sociotechnical context (Jasanoff 2015).

There are three reasons why it is crucial to understand these imaginaries. First, they predict what future journalists will face when they work with humans and AI. AI performs routine tasks (e.g., data scraping, template-based writing); however, how novice data journalists envision their future roles as passive "tool users" or active "conductors" (Fang 2023) determines whether journalistic values such as public accountability and critical inquiry persist. Second, imaginaries mediate ethical adoption processes. Chinese journalists now worry that AI's "rigid" output is soulless (Zhang and Liu 2024), that algorithmic bias will widen societal fault lines, and that generative-model "hallucinations" clash with political sensitivities. How aspirants imagine these risks determines their ability to mitigate potential damage. Third, imaginaries mediate between resistance and compliance in constrained

spaces. Students may adopt state narratives of AI as promoting "socialist core values" (Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission 2023) or as critical literacies that resist technological determinism (Brennen et al. 2022).

Aitamurto and Boyles (2025) explored four dimensions through which journalistic norms and practices, affected by "imaginary constructed visions," explain the importance of algorithmic imaginaries among journalism aspirants. In algorithmic distribution, journalistic tasks become more challenging as journalists attempt to maintain event or fact reporting over search engines' preferences. China's virtual ecosystems may influence aspirants to become AI assistants instead of conductors, thereby compromising journalistic integrity and ethics. This dynamic may distance aspirants from journalism's public service mission because independent journalists in China, although not in favor of algorithms, produce content that complies with algorithms to raise traffic and attract audiences (Zhang et al. 2020). Umejei (2022) similarly found that Nigerian journalists on Chinese platforms compromise journalistic autonomy to increase viewership and algorithmic optimization.

We draw on the lens of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff 2015) to frame algorithmic imaginaries as co-produced by technical affordances, institutional power, and cultural values. Therefore, this study asks:

1. How do Chinese journalism aspirants perceive and interpret algorithms and AI in digital media, and how do these interpretations shape their envisioned future professional role?
2. How do Chinese journalism aspirants view the future of journalism in the New Era of China, and what role do their imaginaries play in constructing this perceived future and societal values?

Algorithmic imaginaries shape journalists' perspectives on AI, influencing how society navigates AI narratives and professional values. This study applies the concept of algorithmic imaginaries, defined as "the way people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms" (Bucher 2019), to comprehend AI and human interaction, how journalism aspirants envision AI in the Chinese media landscape, how perceptions of AI shape professional role visions, and what strategies they devise to align with or challenge AI and Chinese society.

Algorithmic imaginaries, rooted in Science and Technology Studies (STS), explain how technology embodies sociocultural meanings beyond its technical characteristics. The perceptions and interpretations of technology are rooted in historical processes that assign meanings and construct mythologies. Jasanoff (2015) defines sociotechnical imaginaries as "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures." This scope extends from nation-states to professional societies and collectivities (Hendriks et al. 2025). Algorithmic imaginaries emphasize the interplay among platforms, users, media narratives, and societal beliefs (Maragh-Lloyd et al. 2025; Bank 2025), which affect journalism (Diakopoulos 2019). Journalists co-construct imaginaries by assigning meaning to AI (Ji et al. 2024), thereby influencing their role performance (Lewis et al. 2019). As journalistic values are susceptible to spatial or geopolitical imaginaries, AI's "thingness" must be spatially understood (Suchman 2023; Hecht 2012). Kuai (2025) used

this lens to analyze the integrated shaping of society, politics, education, and journalism.

China's education system shapes students' political ideologies, journalistic values, and media perceptions (Repnikova 2017). The lack of AI in education has led to calls for its inclusion (Zhu et al. 2025; Wang 2022; Hollanek et al. 2025). Wang and Kuntz (2023) reported that students interact with media as a primary source for forming their imaginaries. They found that comparative analyses with countries such as the US and Japan influence these imaginaries. Frau-Meigs (2024) found that Chinese students prioritize morality- and competency-oriented values, while Americans focus on self-improvement, although both affirm honesty and responsibility. Carlson (2018) noted that imaginaries shape algorithmic authority, which is also supported by Chinese studies (Zhang et al. 2020).

RQ1: How do Chinese journalism aspirants perceive and interpret algorithms and AI in digital media, and how do these interpretations envision their future professional roles?

Recently, private, governmental, and informal media in China have created a diverse and evolving landscape (Zhang et al. 2024). This competition has led to AI's growing influence on content production, distribution, and user engagement, raising questions about identity, values, and ethics (Xi and Latif 2022; Zhang et al. 2024; Liu et al. 2025), alongside concerns regarding news authenticity and trust (Levy-Landesberg and Cao 2025). However, the Chinese public appears to support AI in complementing news broadcasting (Sun et al. 2024).

Functional AI news anchors (e.g., Xin Xiaomeng at Xinhua) and hosts (e.g., Xiaoyu at Hangzhou News Broadcast) symbolize the New Era of Chinese media. Cloning technology that simulates human voices and movements raises ethical concerns. Levy-Landesberg and Cao (2025) introduced the concept of technovocality, analyzing sociopolitical concerns arising at the intersection of voices and media, and described how Sogou and Xinhua produced AI clones of human anchors.

The "New Era" in China is linked to Xi's leadership (Rena and Hillman 2024). Scholars have contrasted it with China's past, emphasizing modern values (Brown 2018). Some have glorified China's economic rise as the "New China," while Xi associates the New Era with achieving global autonomy by 2049 (Rena & Hillman 2024). We explore how journalism students' imaginaries are influenced by AI-infused journalism in this New Era, revealing whether aspirants align with national discourses or construct alternative visions. Wang and Kuntz (2023) highlighted how students' memories, perceptions, and media consumption shape their understanding of the New Era. Aladdine (2022) termed this media diversification a "digital revolution," which has shaped journalism students' perceptions of the transformation of journalism. The Chinese education system is gradually adopting AI technologies (Long and Zeng 2016; Wang 2020; Ma et al. 2025).

Thus, we ask:

RQ2: How do Chinese journalism aspirants view the future of journalism in the New Era, and what role do their imaginaries play in constructing this perceived future and its societal values?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The study used a semi-structured qualitative approach to explore students' perceptions of algorithmic applications in journalism, their understanding of the future of journalism, and their envisioned professional roles in the Chinese media landscape. To collect nuanced data, 37 journalism students from three reputable Chinese universities in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou were selected. We contacted the relevant administration in journalism schools responsible for student affairs. The administration circulated our request with an open invitation to participate in this study without offering any financial incentives. From the interested volunteers, we recruited 37 journalism students with strong knowledge and articulate communication skills, all of whom were determined to pursue a career in Chinese journalism or media. The pool was clearly informed on the aim of the study (to explore their views on algorithms and the future of journalism in China) before they provided consent to participate. They were informed that we were not evaluating their knowledge or seeking politically affiliated opinions but aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of their perspectives on the subject. The selected cases ensured diversity in university affiliation, gender, and years of study, contributing to the collection of distinctive narratives. The sample was distributed across students in their second-to-last semesters (20% from the second semester, 30% from the third to seventh semesters, and 50% from the last semester). Most students (70%) were from urban areas, such as Beijing. Furthermore, 20% were from smaller cities/towns in western China, and 10% reported a rural background. Five respondents affirmed their affiliation with the CPC. This sample was purposively selected to ensure diversity of perspective; we do not claim generalizability.

2.2. Data collection

All students were interviewed between December 2024 and April 2025 using an in-depth, semi-structured qualitative approach. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was conducted via secure video conferencing platforms. The interviews were conducted in Chinese by the principal researcher. Additionally, 11 follow-up interviews were conducted with participants whose responses required further elaboration for clarification. In total, 48 interview transcripts were documented. The interview protocols were developed to align with the research questions. A pilot study was conducted with four Chinese participants not included in the primary sample from Malaysia (1), Pakistan (1), and China (2). The pilot study experience helped refine our protocols. We developed three major categories of questions (see Table 1): (1) participants' experiences, views, and understanding of algorithms in the New Era and their imagined future work; (2) their understanding, hopes, and concerns regarding the role of algorithms in future journalism; and (3) their reflections on the role of education, training (e.g., internship), and the

sociopolitical context in shaping perspectives. Probing questions were asked to obtain more detailed information.

Section	Core Questions	Research Alignment
Opening & Rapport (5 min)	Tell me about yourself, your name, age, and educational activities. What do you do after school, your routine? Are you practically engaged with journalism? How do you do it?	Establishes professional identity context
Category 1: Present Experiences & Visions	4. How do you define an algorithm and AI? 5. What defines China's New Era in journalism or media in a broader sense? 5. Describe your most significant personal experience with algorithms in news consumption or production. What human skills would remain irreplaceable in an AI-driven Chinese media? How do you envision integrating AI tools into your ideal future journalism workflow? Which core journalistic responsibilities should never be fully automated in your view?	RQ1: Personal interpretations → Professional role
Category 2: Future Societal Role	What positive societal impacts could AI-powered journalism bring to China in the next decade? What hidden risks might emerge if algorithms dominate news curation? Sketch an ideal vs. problematic AI journalism scenario for 2030. How could algorithms affect journalists' accountability to the public?	RQ2: Societal values → Future imaginaries
Category 3: Formative Context	What aspect of your education has most prepared you to navigate AI in journalism? Describe an internship (or any other) experience that reshaped your view of technology's constraints/possibilities. Was there a moment when classroom theory clashed with technological realities?	Contextual grounding for RQ1/RQ2
V. Synthesis & Closing	Complete this: "In the future, a journalist's primary role will be..." What one tradition from pre-AI journalism must be preserved? Are there any crucial aspects we haven't covered?	Imaginaries crystallization

Table 1. Interview protocols of the study

The interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and reviewed by three language experts. Initially, the Chinese transcripts were sent to a professional translator. All authors reviewed the translated version to ensure coherence. After mutual agreement, the final English and Chinese versions were sent to two English language experts well-versed in Chinese to evaluate their coherence and accuracy. The final version was used for analysis. We used the best possible English translations for slang, sarcasm, and key expressions to retain explanatory power.

2.3. Data Analysis

The analysis focused on the transcribed data to uncover discursive constructions underpinning participants' algorithmic imaginaries and their envisioned future of journalism. We drew on Fairclough's (2003) perspective on the natural process of meaning-making in discourse. A multi-tier coding method was used (Corbin and Strauss 2012). Initially, open coding identified emerging concepts, which were condensed into provisional categories. Axial coding explored relationships between categories, and selective coding identified central themes and variations. The process employed a consistent, comparative approach. Linguistic features were analyzed after thematic analysis, focusing on semantic relations (e.g., humans vs. algorithms), lexical choices (e.g., alternatives for algorithms), and modality (e.g., [un]certainty in recommendations). This revealed underlying assumptions, argumentative strategies, and variations in meaning-making. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Participants reviewed the finalized summary to confirm their consent to ensure data validity. We used NVivo 10 for analysis.

3. Results

3.1. From AI Writing to Writing AI

The central theme that emerged from participants' frequent indication of a journalistic "new era" shaped by AI was how they imagine AI, algorithms, and journalism in the new era of Chinese media. Participants viewed AI and journalism as inseparable and unsustainable without each other in journalism and Chinese media at large. The frequent words that interviewees used to describe the new era of Chinese media were "AI media," "automated reporting," "no human media," "AI vloggers," "AI podcasters," "robotic broadcasting," and "AI journalism." Participants reflected upon thinking about the new era without AI as "…shallow thoughts of a journalistic newbie" (P23). As a student with an urban background responded about the journalistic new era, "AI reporters, broadcaster(s), and automated news, nothing more."

Most participants did not refer to any state policy or initiatives related to the new era, except for three students who referred to governmental AI policies, China's vision to be an AI superpower, and the use of AI in China's defense system. Their frequency of following national news was higher than that of other respondents.

This finding signifies that governmental narratives influenced their new era imaginaries. However, other participants reported that their major sources of information were social media platforms, especially Weibo and WeChat. Most participants did not compare Chinese media with any Western media when discussing the new era of Chinese journalism or media. The variation in students' new era imaginaries appeared to be shaped by their preferred sources of information, as indicated by their responses.

"I know this progress won't be possible without our political leadership. The Party is directing the country to the new path; I mean, economic growth, global power, technology, and so many more. China is progressing" (P33, one of the State media followers).

> I'm proud. We have invented so many things that (the) West is far behind us, things like robots, our researches. Haven't you heard of (the) Chinese Agricultural Revolution! China is not backward; it's evolving, rising, and will be the superpower soon. We are on track. AI innovation is one of the best examples; see DeepSeek and compare it with ChatGPT. Haven't you seen the AI news reporter or newscaster? (P 5, a social media user).

Students perceive algorithms in the new era of Chinese media, especially in journalism practices, as context-blind, trend- and hashtag-chasing, and biased tools with no ethical training. Although they view media algorithms as complementary tools to human effort, they are concerned about their potential to overtake jobs in the media. Their perception of algorithms was mixed; they were in favor of algorithmic efficiency and its ability to complement human work, yet critical of an excessive focus on trends that marginalized other important indigenous and national events. As P4, an intern in a local media channel, responded when asked about her views on algorithms,

> I think it's the algorithm in the back that pops up the stories that I frequently search or view. Same happens with my friend in school, but sometimes I'm in the mood for listening (to) music or watching a (favorite) movie of my taste, but it throws dresses, make-up, and such kind of stuff, 废话 [twice], [pause]…I think it doesn't always follow me.

As P31, a seventh-semester student, explained,

> … let me describe a bit, aahhmm, I think the [China's] Space Project was more important than Russia and Ukraine. Why (is) my phone showing me news about them; isn't it weird? It means algorithms ONLY [he emphasized] go for what most of the people are interested in, 6.6.6 [sarcastically used].

They also viewed algorithms and AI as the same, thinking of them as a tool, language, program, and GenAI because the majority of students used these terms while responding to algorithms and AI. They associated AI with DeepSeek, ChatGPT,

Kimi, Sora, and Baidu ERNIE, viewing these tools as AI itself rather than its applications. However, senior students described AI as a language model, language tool, language prompt, and language reader program. The interviewees emphasized the cost and time efficiency of using AI and acknowledged its value for educational purposes. A second-semester student, P14, stated, "AI and algorithms are not the same? I think when I write a prompt to DeepSeek, I am interacting with its algorithm; is that not good? It could sum up things for me, and I can prepare for exams easily."

However, when describing its use in Chinese media, participants' views were entirely different. They viewed AI in journalism as contrary to the journalistic values, which they described as the delivery of facts, emotion, real-time, and on-the-ground reporting, and reflection of what people think. In contrast, AI only analyzes data and does not know the context. Therefore, "if it is, whatever it is whether right or wrong, available as data, the AI can only tell you that (P10)." The majority of students expressed concern about using AI in the media, citing AI broadcasting while acknowledging its error-free ability to read news. P21 stated,

> "Yes, AI does not make mistakes while reading news as it often happens with a human; it doesn't show fatigue, emotions, and awkward moments, but it can only read the news [moderate pause]. It could never be an analyst, but data catcher, and by the way [with a heavier tone], what data could it have, if I [human] stop writing on the internet!"

Journalism students who are engaged with journalism through internships, writing blogs, stories, and commentaries on social media had different narratives about their future roles in journalism than those who are not practically engaged with it. The engaged respondents believed that their future journalistic roles would be challenging, tough, painful, and difficult to sustain. However, they were passionate about retaining journalistic values such as delivering facts, reporting ground realities, and practicing impartiality. They believed that their skills were more important than AI, even when using AI in journalism. They were not afraid of being jobless but were confident that AI could not replace them.

They also reported that AI assistance would be part of their future tasks in journalism because of the large amount of information flow, which cannot be crafted single-handedly or managed efficiently. Although they used AI assistance to complete tasks on time, they were not in favor of using AI for content writing, specifically for unique stories and investigative journalism. They pointed out that these domains are highly contextual and sensitive, and that AI and algorithms do not understand them.

> Look, in (the) future, if I'm working on a story of a single parent woman with no child left to take care of her, I can do it better than any language programming tool. I guess it would take a longer time and efforts to correct the AI-produced stories than my own writing, but yes, I can have some ideas from AI (P2).

It [AI] cannot take my job because they cannot hold it accountable; at the end, it's me [human]. I would be in command, I would be accused or defused. AI and algorithms don't stand in air; human(s) materialize them, we give them life. OK, OK, AI can write better, but we write the AI. I won't be jobless, unless I'm skill-less (P15).

The non-engaged respondents feared that AI journalism and algorithmic prevalence would leave no space for journalism students in the media. A segment of programming experts would take over their jobs, and they would be left with no choice but to vlog, podcast, or self-report on social media or similar platforms. When asked about their future professional role, P4 replied, "Job! Hehe, I might not be able to have a job in media because the AI reporters and robots in the newsrooms will not let me in." However, they explained that without adhering to the core journalistic values of fact-finding and reporting without any political bias or influence, they could not sustain themselves as independent journalists. Like the engaged participants, they also acknowledged the hybrid model of independent journalism, but were concerned that in the near future, AI and human interaction in journalism would make job hunting highly competitive, highly specialized, and data-oriented. Most participants interpreted algorithmic use in journalism and media under the umbrella of the evolving Chinese media landscape. For example, P19 stated,

I remember my father reading newspapers, I mean printed ones, but I read and watch them on my tab, rarely on LED. News, broadcasting, anchoring, reporting, and even writing have all changed and are changing, without sound effects and so many complex graphics, and now AI! Computer-generated anchors, broadcasters, content writers, and influencers are publishing news.

3.2. Media Hybridity Shaping Empathetic Journalism

The Chinese students articulated the future of Chinese journalistic media as an integration of AI and human work – Media Hybridization. They did not imagine pure AI journalism (except P9) and consistently used words like "impossible," "out of the question," "no way," and "never." The viable path involves algorithmic data handling, news distribution, multilingual translations, and textual analysis that complement journalistic work, improving efficiency and so-called real-time effectiveness – "its work won't have impact like humans do" (P7). However, media hybridization risks the erosion of ethical empathy, contextual awareness, and investigative depth in stories. One of the participants from a rural background said, "AI writing would be empty emotions, no context, no empathy; it could make good breaking news of agricultural crisis, but, because I'm from a village, I can describe on (the) ground how a young, ambitious farmer will be feeling in that very moment" (P1).

Their imaginaries about the future of Chinese journalism were focused on societal issues that they described as data-driven, algorithmic "pick and choose," and viral content being considered valid. The prevalent trends in media, mediated by algorithms, have forced journalists to report, write, and analyze these trends. However, journalism in the future is expected to be highly contextualized and investigative because "every viral content is not valid" (P17). The overabundance of information

on social media, including independent journalists' content, reduces the shelf life of important stories, events, and facts, a problem that will likely worsen in the future due to the algorithmic dependence of the media.

> I believe you also witness that every viral content is viral until the next viral story is on the screen. The war, poverty, a child story, and even a popular song or movie are all important and viral until the algorithm picks another viral content. This will worsen in the future. Your pain, your story, my good guess, would have lasted only for 30 to 40 minutes (P23, part-time journalistic content writer).

One student noted in frustration, "A celebrity giving coins to beggars will be viral, but not the issue of beggary itself." This reflects a broader anxiety that AI-curated content may privilege surface-level spectacle over structural depth, creating a media reality in which symbols overshadow substance.

Almost all participants mentioned AI-generated reporters, hosts, influencers, and female models on social media, indicating deep concerns about their prevalence in the near future, which could seriously endanger the ability to report on complex human phenomena. Quantifying events and trends will be left to AI and algorithms, but in-depth investigation, individual stories, and especially latent facts or marginalized forms of silent suffering will remain imperative journalistic domains because "Codes can't see the silent suffering" (P20). In contrast, only one male junior student from Beijing imagined a pure AI journalistic future, describing it as "Every media house (is) going to have AI reporters, anchors and broadcasters, behind the newsrooms, AI analysts as well. Codes are going to prevail, period" (P9). The specialized journalist role of the future was articulated as

> Well, my duty will not be reporting, for example, only the war data. It will be like reporting from the war zone, listening to the grandmother's stories, the widow's help, and frightened children, and forcing algorithms to carry their voices (P26).

Without comparing to international media houses, they proudly expected the global reach of Chinese media because of its advancement in AI-generated content accuracy and multilingual translations. Chinese culture, scientific advancement, and China's voice in global power would be the primary content distributed globally. They were skeptical about independent journalists' impact, having contrasting perspectives, as algorithmic dominance and surveillance were simultaneously increasing and being enforced, potentially censoring their voices: "One glitch and everything is vanished; who knows what AI would do with my content?" (P16). Almost half of the participants described the journalistic future as focused on effective visuals (e.g., graphics and color combinations) and accurate AI audio, including translation and 360° reporting. The most impactful media hybridization would be 3D-generated visuals with actual human-voice reporting of unseen events, marginalized stories, invisible scientific discoveries, and inaccessible areas. One of the

senior students, referring to the recent discovery of pillars beneath the pyramids of Giza, said,

> Reading news about huge pillars beneath the Egyptian pyramids is not attractive and takes time, but 3D videos of these pillars at CGTN and elsewhere are like Waoo… they attract everyone. Within one or two minutes, you can learn about seven years' worth of research. I think these methods will be sustained in journalism.

Despite their concerns about algorithmic and AI dominance, censorship, unemployment, and data-driven facts, they perceived AI and algorithmic prevalence in the media as serving society in dynamic ways, such as disseminating national discourses, narratives, and vital governmental instructions to all multilingual Chinese communities promptly. AI's effective translation ability would break language barriers, and it would be highly convenient for local news channels and independent journalists to access, comprehend, and report on cultural complexities in other languages. The participants from rural backgrounds elaborated on the possibilities of media-mediated local-language early warnings, such as alerts about the urgent need for rain harvesting, and about floods, droughts, and insect invasions in agricultural contexts.

The participants also described how AI has introduced new employment opportunities in media and journalism, and emphasized that they should be prepared in advance, considering emerging interdisciplinary approaches, such as journalistic data science, AI journalism, automated graphics and design editing, AI content editing, and algorithm development. Although they frequently mentioned guest lectures, workshops, and training on emerging interdisciplinary domains, their formal coursework did not align with industry requirements: "I cannot develop algorithms, work as an AI graphics editor, or even generate AI influencers. What future do I have?" (P27, senior student). They urged more practical work and AI-related courses and training. A student with an urban background stated,

> I should spend one or two days in the classroom, and the rest of the time in the field. I wish my studies could have been like this. The future is not about what you have studied, but what you can do! (P12).
> I know what investigative journalists do because I attended their lectures, but I can't do that; I haven't been with them to be trained (P25).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Using a qualitative in-depth study approach, this study conducted 37 interviews (along with 11 follow-up interviews) with journalism aspirants from different Chinese universities to investigate how journalism aspirants perceive and interpret algorithms and AI in the new era of Chinese journalism. The study also explored what professional roles they imagine in transforming the Chinese media

landscape, and how they view the future of Chinese journalism and its broader social impact. This study explores the complex algorithmic imaginaries within the sociopolitical and technological context of the Chinese media ecosystem, providing a solid foundation for a deeper understanding of the future of Chinese media, particularly journalistic practice. The dominant narrative that emerged was that AI is algorithmically entangled with journalism, an inseparable relationship that places AI in an integral position in the future of the Chinese media landscape. The journalism students did not perceive a binary contest between machine and human, but rather a complementary or mediated partnership, described as media hybridization. This partnership allows each to compensate for the other's constraints—on the one hand, improving journalistic efficiency and, on the other, mitigating the limitations of AI and algorithms. This hybridization also benefits China's diverse geographic and linguistic territories and has emerged as a stabilizing metaphor that encompasses essential tasks such as multilingual translation, data processing, and content distribution. Their AI and algorithmic imaginaries could be viewed as a "hybridization" model of Chinese media. This aligns with several previous studies (e.g., Dörr 2016; Carlson 2018), including studies on Chinese students (Wang and Kuntz 2023).

Contrary to Wang and Kuntz's (2023) identification of Chinese students' limited knowledge of the New Era concerning national imaginaries, our findings indicated that students provided rich descriptions of the New Era within the Chinese media landscape. However, similar to Wang and Kuntz's (2023) findings, most students did not articulate their imaginaries as being influenced by state policies or initiatives. The source of information emerged as a key factor shaping these imaginaries, as their perceptions and interpretations of China's AI supremacy were implicitly absorbed through various state media outlets. The students' restricted imaginaries, limited to the Chinese Media landscape, that is, without comparisons to international media houses or policies, reaffirmed an implicit alignment with national narratives. This contradicts Guo's (2021), Astarita and Patience's (2020), and, in the Chinese context, Wang and Kuntz's (2023) emphasis on a comparative perspective of students' imaginaries. Consequently, the integrated context of China's distinctive technological advancement, influenced by national narratives of global leadership and propagated through state-driven media ecology, discloses this implicit ideological alignment. This is revealed in the students' descriptions of state-affirming technological optimism, expressed through narratives of national pride, progress, and development.

At the same time, epistemological and ethical concerns, as well as certain fears, were prevalent in these imaginaries, as students consistently attributed the transformative new era of Chinese media to AI's algorithmic bias, data dependence, and lack of emotional depth. Such a pattern reflects a conscious and critical interpretation of the existing and anticipated contest between prevalent journalistic values and algorithmic logic. It also resonates with the materialist phenomenology of Couldry and Hepp (2017), who argued that algorithmic media prefer quantification over contextualization, which thereby reconstructs social reality and discourse around what is visible, viral, and thus validated. Although journalism aspirants distinguish

between viral and valid content, this distinction elicits deep anxiety about the algorithmic and AI infrastructure of news production, which could potentially damage the core journalistic values of contextualized storytelling, uncovering latent facts, and investigative reporting.

Heterogeneous imaginaries are shaped by exposure to practical journalism and political affiliation. Practical experience highlights the tension between algorithmic pressure to produce viral content and the normative commitment to public service journalism. Although this dynamic elicits a compromise of journalistic independence on digital platforms (Caplan and Boyd 2018), it also shows that future journalists are not passive adopters of AI and algorithms, further highlighting their decisive orientation toward ethical and professional use of these technologies. Such findings contradict Umejei's (2022) argument about the algorithmic coercion of journalists to produce popular content. The irreplaceability of human contextual, ethical, and affective labor in highlighting human suffering, rather than merely presenting data, resonates with the recent journalistic concept of "human infrastructure," an imperative mediating force for technology (Anderson 2017). Political affiliation shapes algorithmic imaginaries that are influenced by state narratives framing the evolving Chinese media landscape as an affirmative product of governmental efforts and effective policy initiatives. This aligns with Zhang et al. (2020), who explored the role of politics in shaping the sociotechnical imaginaries of the masses.

Viral journalism, as proposed by Kostarella and Palla (2024), focuses on attractive headlines that evoke public emotions, thereby compromising information credibility and integrity, discouraging profound and critical investigation, and ultimately resulting in a loss of public trust in the media. We refer to this phenomenon as the "viral-valid fallacy." This fallacy represents a nuanced differentiation between the virality of content and the validity of information, highlighting how the rapid overflow of information across media platforms shortens the lifespan of important issues. This links social media, the "breeding ground for misinformation" (Agbasiere 2024), with mainstream media and underscores the importance of content integrity, credibility, and reliability. Thus, because it is generally assumed that viral content is inherently valid, which we identify as a fallacy, participants who were aware of this misconception insisted on prioritizing the quality and validity of journalism over its virality. The fallacy is rooted in the broader societal shift in communication, driven by algorithmic control of visibility, which reduces the longevity of public concerns about important issues and amplifies the epiphenomenon; for example, a slip of the tongue when describing poverty alleviation may receive more attention than the issue of poverty itself.

The fallacy serves as a critical conceptual intervention in the current information ecosystem, particularly within contemporary media, which often misrepresents and misinterprets viral content as valid. This could be unintentional, as the media's fundamental responsibility is to deliver facts. Nevertheless, viral content creates a general impression of validity, and the media reinforces this by reporting it explicitly as "viral content." By naming and conceptualizing this fallacy, we aim to initiatea scholarly and journalistic dialogue about the epistemological risks

inherent in algorithm-driven content dissemination. The fallacy reveals how journalistic ethics, digital media, and news organizations compromise their integrity and credibility through the pursuit of visibility and shareability of viral content, which could potentially distort public understanding and marginalize substantive issues. One of the essential reasons for highlighting this fallacy is that, on the one hand, it challenges normative assumptions about viral content, and, on the other hand, it offers media houses potential opportunities to reclaim their commitment to validity, depth, and public trust. Therefore, the "viral-valid fallacy" is not just a conceptual tool, but also an actionable roadmap guiding researchers toward valid content and a deeper understanding of the facts they must evaluate and report.

Imagining the future of the Chinese media landscape and their professional roles, some participants feared job displacement while reflecting on the rapidly transforming mainstream media and the misalignment of their educational training with this transformation. Participants indicated that specialized, interdisciplinary media jobs in the future would demand competitive skills rather than educational credentials. Highlighting these skills, they emphasized algorithmic reasoning, graphics production, and audience analytics. This highlights the urgent need to address the misalignment, which could inhibit graduates' readiness to engage with and transform the media landscape.

Conclusively, the imaginaries of Chinese journalism students reflect AI and algorithms as discursive agents – neither mere tools nor existential threats – co-constructing the transforming journalistic roles, including professional identity and societal communication. Their sociopolitical and pedagogical contexts implicitly shape their algorithmic imaginaries of the new era of Chinese media. However, their conscious and critical appraisal of the transforming Chinese media landscape revealed a complex interplay between human infrastructure and AI imperatives, while preserving the core ethical values of journalism, including contextualized, investigative, and factual reporting. These findings offer a future coexistence, rather than a competitive environment, between algorithmic efficiency, journalistic integrity, and human judgment, and extend an invitation to technology developers, media policymakers, and journalism scholars to co-design an AI-human collaborative media landscape.

Future research may extend this study by investigating the evolving imaginaries of students as they enter the workforce, and by comparing these imaginaries with those of students who have pursued independent journalism, podcasting, or vlogging. Furthermore, future research may examine the comparative development of imaginaries by selecting students from rural and urban backgrounds, with varying political affiliations, or by incorporating broader transnational perspectives on openness to sources of information. Understanding the imaginaries of individuals in a sociopolitical system that seeks to establish its global supremacy is not just an academic exercise; rather, it is a necessary endeavor to shape a more reflective and equitable future for the media.

AI Disclosure Statement

We confirm that we used ChatGPT (GPT-4o) and DeepSeek-V3 in preparing this manuscript for stylistic and grammatical refinement. The AI tools were utilized to enhance clarity, coherence, and readability; however, all intellectual contributions, arguments, and analyses remain our own.

Ethical Consideration

The Ethical Research Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Arts at Xingzhi College of Xi'an University of Finance and Economics has evaluated the case. It certifies that the research study of Ms. Liu Juan (Registration No. 20180401) entitled "AI in Journalism: Chinese Aspirants' Role Imaginaries and Societal Reflections" does not involve any sensitive information or include any identification of respondents. The committee, therefore, grants ethical approval for this study.

Informed Consent

All participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study prior to participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. In cases where participants were under the age of 18, written informed consent was obtained from their parent or legal guardian. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that all data would be kept confidential and used solely for research and publication purposes.

Disclosure Statement

No conflicts of interest are reported.

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