

# Teaching Media Ethics as a Controversy: A Pragmatic Framework for Chinese Journalism Education

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**Abstract:** Journalism education in China currently operates within a profound structural tension: it must strictly adhere to the state-mandated “Marxist View of Journalism” as its fundamental ideological guide, while simultaneously equipping students with the professional competencies demanded by a globalized media environment. This deep-seated normative friction often compels educators to adopt defensive “gatekeeping” strategies and bureaucratic risk aversion in the classroom. Consequently, students experience a severe epistemic disconnect between sanitized theoretical instruction and the complex, morally ambiguous dilemmas of real-world reporting, rendering them vulnerable to cynicism and narratives proclaiming the “uselessness of journalism.” Drawing upon Michael Hand’s “epistemic criterion,” this essay argues that media ethics must be explicitly taught as an open, controversial issue. It demonstrates that both Western liberal models and contemporary Chinese Marxist paradigms possess profound internal theoretical coherence and practical rationality, despite their conflicting ontological assumptions regarding state power and the public good. To break the current pedagogical deadlock without compromising macro-political safety, this paper proposes a localized adaptation of Thomas E. Kelly’s “Committed Impartiality.” Within this framework, “commitment” is redefined as an institutional baseline that treats the Marxist view as a non-negotiable professional boundary, while “impartiality” is re-operationalized as descriptive professionalism that ensures a fair, evidence-based presentation of competing paradigms. Furthermore, this theoretical model is enacted through a structured “Collaborative Argumentation” mechanism, a four-phase classroom procedure incorporating technical topic selection, depoliticized semantic shifts, and disciplined role-playing. Ultimately, this framework provides a politically viable and epistemically rigorous compromise, safeguarding critical micro-level spaces for professional inquiry.

**Keywords:** Media ethics; Chinese journalism education; Committed impartiality

**Online publication:** June 30, 2026

## 1. Introduction

Media ethics is essentially an active practice of moral reasoning required to navigate conflicting social interests, rather than a set of established dogmas. In the context of Chinese journalism education, teaching in

this field is caught in a profound structural tension between the state-mandated “Marxist View of Journalism” acting as the fundamental guide and the professional demands originating from Western journalism professionalism. This tension frequently forces educators to adopt defensive “gatekeeping” strategies in the classroom, thereby inadvertently depriving students of the professional judgment needed to handle complex practices.

This essay argues that, based on the “epistemic criterion”<sup>[1]</sup>, media ethics should be taught as an open, controversial issue. The following sections will first demonstrate the epistemic rationality of this pedagogical approach and deconstruct the institutional roots of current pedagogical evasion. Subsequently, it proposes a localized adaptation of “Committed Impartiality”<sup>[2]</sup>, which is operationalized through a “Collaborative Argumentation” mechanism, ultimately providing a pragmatic pedagogical framework.

## **2. The epistemic defense of media ethics as a controversy**

Before exploring pedagogical strategies, it is necessary to firmly establish the epistemic status of media ethics as a “controversial issue”. Current journalism education frequently transmits specific paradigms unilaterally as unquestionable truths. However, Michael Hand’s (2008) “epistemic criterion” posits that when an issue has multiple rationally defensible viewpoints, it ought to be taught as a controversy<sup>[1]</sup>. Accordingly, this section will deconstruct Western-centric assumptions, articulate the deep-seated normative friction between Chinese and Western paradigms, and demonstrate the necessity of open deliberation.

### **2.1. De-monolithizing the assumption and defending dual rationality**

Acknowledging the controversial nature of media ethics primarily requires discarding academic assumptions that unilaterally deprive competing paradigms of their rational defensibility. Traditional Western-centric perspectives often elevate Western “libertarianism” as the sole legitimate standard, while reductively dismissing Marxism as an irrational propaganda tool. This is both theoretically and empirically flawed<sup>[3]</sup>.

First, the Western media framework is not an absolute monolith of unrestricted freedom. As Ward (2015) points out, Western journalism has evolved into the “Social Responsibility theory,” acknowledging that media are constrained by social norms<sup>[4]</sup>. Its “watchdog” role is a rational institutional choice only within the specific confines of a liberal democratic social contract, not a universal, absolute truth<sup>[5]</sup>.

Second, the contemporary Marxist view of journalism is by no means a rigid instrument. Zhao’s (1998) research reveals that Chinese journalism operates through complex negotiations between the “Party line” and the commercial “bottom line,” with practitioners exercising a flexible “localized professionalism”<sup>[6,7]</sup>. Under a developmental political logic prioritizing growth and stability, its “mouthpiece” role is a logically rigorous institutional arrangement designed to build social consensus<sup>[8]</sup>.

In summary, both Western and Chinese paradigms possess profound theoretical coherence and practical rationality, fully satisfying the primary condition for a controversial issue.

### **2.2. The normative friction: establishing the core epistemic dilemma**

The dual rationality of both paradigms does not imply peaceful harmonization in practice; their pedagogical value lies precisely in their deep normative friction. This conflict is rooted in fundamentally divergent ontological assumptions regarding state power and the “public good”.

The Western liberal model views state power with suspicion, positing that maximizing individual

autonomy and maintaining an adversarial state-press relationship best serves the public good. As independent watchdogs, journalists prioritize the public's right to know and institutional accountability above all else<sup>[5]</sup>. Conversely, the Marxist paradigm views the state as the vanguard of the collective will, emphasizing that the public good is achieved through coordinated development and national stability. The press and the state form a symbiotic relationship, prioritizing social cohesion<sup>[8]</sup>. The presentation of truth is contextualized by its social impact and may be delayed if necessary to prevent fracturing social unity.

This is not a simple dichotomy of “truth versus lies,” but a tragic ethical conflict between citizens' right to accountability and the necessity of social order. Because no paradigm can resolve this dilemma without high costs, the issue constitutes a profound epistemic controversy. Instilling a single correct answer in teaching is tantamount to “epistemic indoctrination”<sup>[1]</sup>.

### **3. Institutional constraints and the anatomy of “Gatekeeping”: Reclaiming pedagogical agency**

Given that media ethics constitutes a profound epistemic controversy, educators ought to facilitate open deliberation in the classroom. However, this epistemic ideal faces significant resistance within the Chinese journalism education ecology. This section aims to deconstruct the drivers behind teachers' evasion of controversy and analyze its long-term costs.

#### **3.1. The Status Quo: Structural tension and epistemic disconnect**

Chinese journalism education bears a dual mandate: it must adhere to the fundamental value guidance of the Marxist view of journalism while cultivating students' professional judgment to navigate globalized media<sup>[9]</sup>. In reality, this balance is extremely difficult to maintain, and journalism ethics education often regresses into the unilateral indoctrination of moral norms<sup>[10]</sup>. Educators actively avoid normative conflicts to ensure political safety, resulting in a severe “epistemic disconnect” for students between sanitized classroom theories and complex real-world dilemmas[27].

#### **3.2. Challenging the narrative: A critical rebuttal of external determinism**

Academia frequently attributes this pedagogical rigidity entirely to the coercive constraints of macro-institutional systems<sup>[11]</sup>. This “external determinism” narrative fails to reflect the complex realities of the micro-academic field and must be rebutted.

First, the empirical reality of curricular plurality contradicts the assumption of absolute control, as routine advanced journalism training in China includes rigorous analysis of Western news cases and ethical dilemmas; the institutional framework itself provides tangible academic space for pluralistic study.

Second, this narrative overlooks the hybridity of educational goals within university systems. The curricula of top-tier universities, including Tsinghua University and Peking University, explicitly emphasize “global competence” and “critical thinking” alongside Marxist principles, inherently requiring students to engage with diverse paradigms.

Third, the monolithic narrative falsely reduces educators to passive victims, ignoring their improvisational agency. As Repnikova (2017) notes, within institutional boundaries, educators continually possess fluid, dynamic spaces for “improvisational negotiation”<sup>[12]</sup>.

### **3.3. Deconstructing the anatomy of gatekeeping: Beyond the monolith**

Since maneuverable spaces exist within the macro-structure, the crux of the pedagogical deadlock lies in micro-level dynamics. Teacher self-censorship is rarely born of absolute terror, but is rather a product of bureaucratic caution and entrenched pedagogical habits. As Hassid (2008) points out, the ambiguity of certain boundaries often leads individuals to over-calibrate their actions <sup>[13]</sup>.

A primary driver is bureaucratic caution and risk aversion; in an evaluation system that prioritizes stability and consensus, evading controversy is a pragmatic bureaucratic choice made by teachers to minimize friction and avoid unpredictable consequences.

Another contributing factor is pedagogical paternalism, where some educators underestimate undergraduates' intellectual maturity in handling cognitive conflict, attempting to shield them from necessary intellectual confusion.

## **4. The price of evading controversial issues**

The consequences of this defensive teaching are severe. Hess (2009) argues that evading controversy does not protect students; rather, it completely deprives them of experiencing the “democratic power of discussion” and the cognitive friction essential for developing resilient reasoning <sup>[14]</sup>. Zheng (2020) also warns that if journalism education fails to address genuinely complex professional dilemmas and only teaches purely technical skills, it will inevitably provide an opportunity for the narrative of “the uselessness of journalism” to resurface <sup>[15]</sup>.

### **4.1. Navigating Normative Friction: “Committed Impartiality” as a Pragmatic Pedagogical Framework**

To break the pedagogical deadlock and reclaim agency, educators urgently require a politically viable and epistemically rigorous framework for managing classroom discourse. Thomas E. Kelly (1986) proposed a classic typology of four teacher roles, but within the Chinese institutional context, the first three traditional stances reveal profound theoretical flaws <sup>[2]</sup>.

### **4.2. Evaluating Kelly’s typology: Deconstructing unviable stances**

When facing controversies, the first three stances encounter insurmountable obstacles in Chinese journalism education.

The stance of exclusive partiality involves deliberately promoting a single viewpoint while suppressing opposing paradigms. Driven by institutional caution, this defensive posture aligns with “indoctrination-style” moral education, twisting guidelines into absolute dogma, violating the “epistemic criterion,” and leaving students unequipped to handle global ethical ambiguities.

The approach of exclusive neutrality attempts to banish controversy from the classroom, reducing journalism ethics to a purely technical subject. This strips journalism of its core professional function of addressing ethical conflicts, hollows out the curriculum, and validates the “uselessness of journalism”.

The model of absolute neutrality permits discussion while the teacher strictly conceals their own stance. In China, where the Marxist view of journalism is the official “guiding principle,” maintaining absolute neutrality poses a severe risk of structural misalignment with institutional expectations, while also depriving students of a model for professional judgment.

### **4.3. The localized adaptation of “committed impartiality”**

The rejection of the first three stances logically leads to adopting “Committed Impartiality”. This means teachers should explicitly commit to foundational values while remaining impartial to ensure opposing views receive a fair hearing. However, directly transplanting this concept faces a dual challenge: an “epistemic mismatch” because the Chinese system does not treat all normative views as equally valid, and a “role conflict” since teachers must fulfill ideological leadership duties. Therefore, its core pillars must be redefined in context.

First, the concept of “commitment” must be redefined as an institutional baseline, meaning that the teacher upholds the Marxist view of journalism as a non-negotiable professional boundary in China. This provides a macro-political “safe harbor” for educators, ensuring that micro-academic discussions unfold within a legal framework.

Second, “impartiality” must be redefined as descriptive professionalism rather than normative equivalence. It does not mean allowing students a normative free choice between different values; rather, it refers to the fair, evidence-based, descriptive presentation of competing paradigms. As Hung (2019) suggests, Western news values such as the watchdog function should be strictly framed as descriptive objects of study rather than normative goals <sup>[16]</sup>. This provides students with cognitive scaffolding for objective analysis, achieving deep intellectual rigor without challenging the macro-institutional system.

## **5. Pedagogical enactment: Safe deliberation through collaborative argumentation**

The establishment of theoretical boundaries must be paired with precise classroom operational mechanisms. Drawing on “Collaborative Argumentation”, this section explains how to transform the journalism classroom into a safe environment for evidence-based professional inquiry <sup>[17]</sup>.

### **5.1. Scaffolding the deliberation and semantic shift**

Effective discussion requires strict pre-set parameters. For topic selection, educators should prioritize technical dilemmas with lower emotional tension, such as transparency balancing in public health crises <sup>[24,25]</sup>, to prevent discussions from being hijacked by nationalism or polarized politics <sup>[26]</sup>. Regarding interaction modes, drawing on Mercer’s (2002) discourse theory, educators should guide students to transition from “cumulative talk” aimed at accumulating shared knowledge to “exploratory talk” focused on logical scrutiny, strictly avoiding win-or-lose “disputational talk” <sup>[18]</sup>.

Furthermore, educators must implement a depoliticized semantic shift. Sensitive terms like “press freedom” must be explicitly abandoned in pedagogical design, replaced by vocabulary such as “professional judgment,” “ethical reasoning,” and “risk mitigation”. This structurally transforms high-risk political opinion sharing into rigorous technical inquiry.

### **5.2. The four-phase procedure of collaborative argumentation**

Acting as a procedural facilitator, the educator must strictly execute four structured phases.

During the initial phase of preparation and evidence retrieval, students are required to independently complete evidence retrieval charts based on both Chinese and Western paradigms. This forces the discussion to be anchored in evidence, effectively mitigating the interference of “motivated reasoning” <sup>[19]</sup>.

In the subsequent phase of structured multi-perspective inquiry, educators utilize role-playing techniques

to require students to detach from their own stances and articulate the professional rationales of opposing paradigms <sup>[20]</sup>. This pedagogical distance helps students objectively identify logical fallacies, treating the debate purely as an academic exercise.

Throughout the third phase of facilitation and academic civility, the teacher acts as a collegial mentor to enforce strict norms of academic civility <sup>[21]</sup>. This ensures that all critiques are directed precisely at professional standards, thereby preventing the dialogue from deteriorating into personal or political attacks.

The final phase of professional synthesis concludes the session with a written reflection where students must transcend binary thinking and synthesize a hybrid reporting plan. This demonstrates that the ultimate goal of ethical deliberation is to achieve outstanding professional judgment, not to declare victory for a single paradigm.

## **6. A critical defense of the pedagogy**

Under institutional scrutiny, this pedagogy maintains robust academic coherence. Regarding concerns over “ideological subversion,” the psychological “assembly bonus effect” indicates that group rational evaluation can actually strengthen an individual’s resolve to logically defend their localized stances <sup>[22]</sup>. Addressing fears of “epistemic relativism” <sup>[23]</sup>, this framework strictly distinguishes between epistemic study and normative advocacy, never dissolving objective professional standards. Confronting anxieties about classroom instability, through strict “curricular gatekeeping” and semantic technicalization, potential instability is thoroughly converted into disciplined academic inquiry <sup>[16]</sup>.

## **7. Conclusion and reflection**

This essay has systematically demonstrated the necessity of teaching media ethics as a controversial issue. It provides a pragmatic pathway to transform potential political risks into rigorous professional inquiry through a localized adaptation of “Committed Impartiality” and the method of “Collaborative Argumentation”.

It must be acknowledged that this framework has inherent fragilities. An over-reliance on the technical discourse of “risk mitigation” may erode the moral weight that journalism ought to possess, potentially breeding cynical professional attitudes. Simultaneously, this framework has strict boundaries of applicability: it is unsuitable for foundational political theory courses where the state maintains an absolute epistemic monopoly, nor is it suitable for introductory classes lacking a professional foundation, which could plunge students into “epistemic relativism”.

Ultimately, this framework is a pragmatic compromise forged under specific institutional constraints. Despite its limitations, fiercely guarding this micro-level space for professional inquiry remains a vital defense against theoretical stagnation and the intellectual disarmament of the next generation of Chinese journalists.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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