

Practical Pathways for Journalists to Cultivate the "Four Abilities" in the Context of Rural Revitalization : A Case Study of China Media Group's "On the Road to Revitalization"

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ABSTRACT

Rural revitalization serves as the overarching approach to addressing the "agriculture, rural areas, and farmers" agenda, while news media act as its megaphone, recorder, and accelerator. The "four capabilities" (footwork, insight, intellect, and writing skills) of journalists determine the depth, warmth, and impact of rural revitalization coverage. This paper takes the large-scale documentary series "On the Road to Revitalization" by China Media Group as its observational sample. It examines how the program exercises these "four capabilities" in its rural revitalization coverage. Based on the current application of these capabilities by journalists in such reporting, the paper distills and summarizes the "four capability pathways" for journalists in the context of rural revitalization. It finds that the program exercises these capabilities in its coverage through: Footwork—gathering firsthand insights on the ground; Eye—spotting value in trending topics; Brain—cultivating and refining core values; Pen—innovating with warmth and humanity. On the Road to Revitalization sets the standard for journalists practicing these four capabilities. Groundwork—trending topics—deep cultivation—innovative expression: This is the key for journalists to effectively communicate rural revitalization.

KEYWORDS

Rural revitalization; News journalists; "Four capabilities"; On the road to revitalization; Implementation pathways

1 Introduction

As the core practitioners of media reporting, journalists' "four capabilities" are the fundamental manifestation of their professional competence. In 2018, at the National Conference on Publicity and Ideological Work, emphasized the need to "continually enhance our ability to gather information, discern the truth, think critically, and communicate effectively, striving to build a team of publicity and ideological workers who are politically reliable, highly competent, pragmatic and innovative, and capable of winning battles." This paper takes the large-scale documentary series "On the Road to Revitalization," produced by the Agricultural and Rural Programs Center of China Media Group, as a case study. It systematically analyzes the implementation logic and specific pathways of the "four capabilities" exercised by journalists in rural revitalization reporting. The findings provide reference for news media to enhance the quality of rural-themed coverage and support the dissemination of the rural revitalization strategy.

2 Current status of journalists' "four capabilities" development in the context of rural revitalization

2.1 Positive progress in implementing the "four capabilities"

First, journalists are stepping up their fieldwork, expanding coverage at the grassroots level ^[1]. Policy initiatives targeting poverty alleviation and rural revitalization have prompted more reporters to leave urban centers and head to the front lines. According to the 2023 China News Industry Development Report, in 2022, 68% of rural coverage by provincial-level and above media outlets involved journalists conducting "resident reporting" in villages—a 23 percentage point increase from 2019. For instance, Xinhua News Agency's "Rural Revitalization Field Notes" and People's Daily's "Seeing Revitalization in Rural Areas" series centered on journalists "immersing themselves at the grassroots level," gathering extensive material through this approach. Second, it demonstrates keen insight with strong policy relevance and accurately identifies key issues ^[2]. The vast majority of journalists can identify key topics such as "food security," "specialty industries," "rural governance," and "returnee entrepreneurship" under the overarching requirements of rural revitalization: "thriving industries, a pleasant living environment, a civilized rural culture, effective governance, and a prosperous life." For example, during the 2023 National Food Security Awareness Week, various media outlets prioritized coverage of topics such as large-scale grain producers and agricultural technology outreach programs, with journalists focusing on key policy initiatives. Third, leverage brainpower through clever and thorough application of technology to conduct deeper analysis ^[3]. The introduction of new technologies such as big data, drones, and satellite remote sensing in news reporting enables journalists to analyze rural data more accurately and observe industrial development patterns. In the program "China's Grain Barn" on CCTV's Financial News Channel, reporters analyzed changes in cultivated land area over the past decade using satellite data. With insights from agricultural experts, they uncovered the underlying logic behind the increase in grain production. Fourth, writing styles are becoming more

accessible to audiences, with increasingly diverse modes of expression ^[4]. Short videos, vlogs, and H5 formats have emerged as new mainstream approaches in rural reporting. By integrating “visuals + text + narration” and “interviewing villagers + on-site filming,” journalists bring the “camera lens” directly into their coverage through firsthand commentary. For example, in the “Rural Revitalization Diary” series on Douyin, journalists documented their experiences in the countryside from a first-person perspective, accumulating over 5 billion total views.

2.2 Practical challenges in implementing the “four capabilities”

First, their “footwork” remains superficial, merely scratching the surface. Some journalists, constrained by time limits or transportation difficulties, merely “touch base” or “visit a few villages” without delving into remote rural areas or “impoverished villages.” Others conduct interviews that only “skim the surface,” offering a cursory glance before moving on, failing to grasp the true situation. For instance, when covering e-commerce in a certain region, one media outlet interviewed only the e-commerce station manager without inquiring about the pain points villagers face when selling goods, and then reported solely on the station manager's perspective. Second, there is a homogenization of “perspective,” with insufficient exploration of topics. Some journalists fail to engage in independent thinking, instead blindly “chasing trending topics” in their reporting. This has led to issues such as “chasing rural tourism” and “chasing specialty crops,” while neglecting topics like “preserving rural culture,” “respecting the elderly,” and “addressing depopulated villages.” As a result, they are unable to accurately reflect the transformations occurring in rural areas. Third, there is a “fragmentation” of mental capacity, with a lack of ability to synthesize and distill information. A handful of journalists remain stuck at the level of “documenting phenomena,” failing to distill the principles for advancing rural development or identify the challenges in policy implementation. Some simply copy official documents verbatim, lacking concrete examples from village contexts and intellectual depth. For instance, when interpreting the establishment of the Rural Revitalization Bureau, they focus solely on its functions without addressing whether it will increase the burden on grassroots levels. Fourth, the “elitism” of writing skills, coupled with a lack of humanistic sensibility. Some editorial staff still rely on bureaucratic jargon and stale clichés, lacking the vernacular, local flavor, and rural authenticity. They even adopt a condescending perspective, reporting from an outsider's standpoint rather than as insiders, thus distancing themselves from the people. For example, a report on “increasing farmers' income” that merely states “farmers' average income rose by X%” without delving into the stories behind this growth makes it difficult for readers to truly empathize.

3 Analysis of how news reporters demonstrate the “four abilities” in “on the road to revitalization”

3.1 Footwork: delving deep into the fabric of rural communities to gather firsthand material

The core essence of “footwork” lies in “getting down to the grassroots.” Journalists covering the “Revitalization Journey” series demonstrated “physical presence” through their ability to “stay grounded, pinpoint locations, cover distances, and expand their reach.” In their reporting practice, they abandoned the pitfall of superficial coverage, truly immersing themselves in the fields and thoroughly understanding every corner of the villages ^[5].

First, “long-term fieldwork” tracks the development journey of rural communities. Our reporters spend 7 to 15 days covering a single village or topic—far exceeding the industry standard of 3 to 5 days—enabling us to document the ‘process’ rather than merely the “outcome.” For example, the 2022 documentary *Relocation to a New Life in the Nuijiang Gorge*, journalists conducted fieldwork in Bingzhongluo Town, Nuijiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. One visit documented the initial relocation from mountainous “log houses” to resettlement sites in 2021, while another in 2022 captured villagers securing employment and children attending school at the new settlement. This “before-and-after” approach demonstrated how the relocation achieved both “stable settlement” and “viable prosperity.” Second, “casting a wide net” to interview a diverse range of subjects. In addition to village officials and industry leaders, reporters also interviewed ordinary farmers, elderly residents, children, and even “marginal figures” such as rural teachers, doctors, and resident cadres, ensuring a diverse range of interviewees. For example, in “The Smart Path to Cultivating Wuchang Rice,” reporters interviewed large-scale grain farmer Wang Jianguo, agricultural technician Li Na, rice processing plant manager Zhang Tao, and land transfer farmer Liu Guilan. The article traces the revitalization journey of Wuchang rice from the perspectives of cultivation, technology, processing, and sales. Third is “experiential reporting,” which involves going out into the fields and farmlands. Journalists immersed themselves in the daily lives and farming activities of villagers to gather firsthand material. For instance, during interviews with the Fengxiang clay figurine tradition in Shaanxi, the reporter shadowed intangible cultural heritage inheritor Hu Xinming to learn clay figurine making, participating in every step from kneading clay and shaping to applying colors. The reporter also attended the villagers' clay figurine cultural festival, interviewing both locals and tourists to infuse the report with an authentic, earthy feel.

3.2 Discernment: accurately identify value and focus on core issues.

On the Road to Revitalization Reporters identified both the “exemplary” and “under-the-radar” aspects of rural revitalization by focusing on “policy priorities and rural needs,” thereby avoiding the trap of formulaic dialogue.

First, seek practical significance from the “last mile of policy implementation.” The column focuses on the “last mile of policy implementation” for the Central Document No. 1 and key tasks of the Rural Revitalization Bureau. For instance, in 2023, under the theme of “Preventing Large-Scale Relapse into Poverty,” it featured “Min County, Gansu: The ‘Anti-Poverty Code’ of Chinese Medicinal Herb Cultivation.” The report highlighted how Min County, Gansu, leveraged the “cooperative + farmer” model to help formerly impoverished households develop angelica and codonopsis cultivation, and the “small farmers + large market” poverty alleviation pathway. It seeks practical significance by examining the most critical “last mile” of policy implementation. Second, focusing on the “unspoken challenges of rural development,” we distill social value. The column focuses on both explicit themes like “industrial prosperity” and implicit themes such as “rural cultural development” and “rural governance.” In “Shandong's Lanling: Village Regulations Foster Healthy Rural Culture,” reporters observed how Dai Village in Lanling County addressed issues like extravagant weddings and funerals and neighborhood disputes by revising its village regulations. This approach distilled the principle that “rural governance requires combining soft constraints with hard measures,” offering valuable insights for other regions to reference. Third, “focusing on the minutiae of farmers' lives” to seek emotional value. Column reporters excel at starting with “small entry points,” using changes in farmers' daily lives—clothing, food, housing, and transportation—to reflect broader transformations in rural development. For instance, in “Qingshen, Sichuan: The Bamboo Weaving Dream of Returning Youth,” the reporter chronicles the transformative journey of Chen Chen, a young returnee who transitioned from “migrant worker” to “bamboo weaver back home.” Through her “entrepreneurial diary,” villagers' stories, and other accounts, the piece vividly illustrates the impact of “talent return” on rural communities—rich in local flavor and deeply moving.

3.3 Mental agility: conducting in-depth analysis and interpretation to distill the essence of ideas

On the Road to Revitalization Guided by the analytical framework of “phenomenon-essence-pattern,” our reporters consistently elevate the intellectual depth of their reporting through data-driven insights, expert commentary, and comparative analysis, thereby avoiding fragmented interpretations.

First, “multiple examples complement each other,” enhancing the credibility of the interpretation. Reporters interviewed case subjects while also consulting local statistical yearbooks, industry reports, and other sources to enhance the credibility of their analysis. For example, the article “Heilongjiang Beidahuang: A ‘Chinese Model’ for Modern Large-Scale Agriculture” cites Beidahuang Group data stating that “in 2022, it produced 45.13 billion jin of grain with a mechanization rate of 99.8%.” It further illustrates the value of modern large-scale agriculture in “safeguarding China's food security” through on-site facts such as “unmanned harvesters” and “satellite remote sensing monitoring.” Second, “expert + villager dialogue” enhances the expertise of the interpretation. The program invites experts from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and local policy researchers to engage in dialogue with villagers about their “real-life experiences.” For example, in “Zhejiang Anji: Rural Practice of ‘Lush Mountains and Clear Waters Are as Valuable as Mountains of Gold and Silver’,” the reporter interviewed Pan Chunlin, a villager from Yucun Village in Anji County (a practitioner of Yucun's transition from “mining” to “tourism”), and Huang Zuhui, a professor at Zhejiang University's Institute of Agricultural Economics. The former shared experiences of “changes happening around them,” while the latter's research explored “the developmental logic of the ecological economy.” This approach made the report both “story-driven” and “thought-provoking.” Third, compare horizontally and vertically to identify patterns of development. Journalists compare similar cases within the same locality and across different regions to identify common challenges and development patterns in rural revitalization. In “Rural Tourism: From Homogenization to Differentiation,” the reporter contrasts two destinations that both leverage scenic landscapes yet face distinct homogenization crises: Dali's Shuanglang Ancient Town in Yunnan (a “viral photo spot”) and Hongcun Village in Yixian County, Anhui (renowned for “Huizhou culture”), which has developed deep experiential tourism. This comparison reveals the fundamental principle that “rural tourism must be rooted in local culture and cannot be mechanically replicated.”

3.4 Writing style: innovating expressive forms to convey humanistic warmth

On the Road to Revitalization By starting from the perspective of the audience, the reporters employed “storytelling techniques + diverse presentation methods + vernacular language” to ensure their coverage was “compelling and impactful,” breaking free from the constraints of “elite-oriented” reporting models.

First, “storytelling”—using small stories to move the audience. The segment abandons the tedious format of “policy explanations plus big data statistics,” instead centering on compelling personal narratives and structured around the “conflict-resolution-growth” framework to make the stories engaging. For example, “Bijie, Guizhou: A Disabled Farmer's Journey Out of Poverty Through Beekeeping” uses the story of disabled farmer Zhou Mingfu—“disability → failed beekeeping attempts → mastering beekeeping techniques with village committee support → helping fellow villagers escape poverty”—as its backdrop. Through vivid details like “his hand stung during his first beekeeping attempt” and “buying his daughter a new schoolbag after selling honey,” the narrative brings the protagonist to life. Second, “prioritizing multiple presentation methods” to meet audience needs. The program features a “TV special + short videos

+ new media graphics” format. The TV segment presents a 25-minute in-depth video, while new media channels release short videos like “One-Minute Rural Stories” and “Reporter Vlogs” tailored for mobile platforms. The official WeChat account publishes “Rural Revitalization Knowledge Points” graphics to supplement policy information. The television broadcast of the program “Fengxiang Clay Sculpture” showcases the entire process of clay sculpture creation for viewers. Meanwhile, the new media platform releases short videos featuring “Clay Sculpture DIY Tutorials,” catering to the younger generation’s growing interest in intangible cultural heritage. Third, “bring in the local flavor” to connect with the audience. Journalists extensively employ farmers’ colloquial speech, eschewing formal written language; simultaneously, reports incorporate rural vernacular and local proverbs, rich in regional flavor. For instance, when reporting on watermelon cultivation in Lankao, Henan, major grain farmer Zhang Jianguo remarked, “In the past, we ‘relied on the weather for our harvest’; now, with guidance from agricultural technicians, we ‘rely on data for our harvest,’ yielding an extra 2,000 yuan per mu!” Such vivid, authentic language lends the article a down-to-earth quality.

4 Core pathways for journalists to practice the “four capabilities” in the context of rural revitalization

4.1 Putting in the legwork to root oneself in the front lines of rural revitalization: from “superficial visits” to “deep integration”

Establish a “grassroots liaison point” system to achieve “long-term tracking.” Media outlets may establish long-term tracking partnerships with townships and village groups by assigning reporters as “rural correspondents.” These correspondents will conduct regular on-site interviews (at least once per month, with each visit lasting no less than three days) to document the dynamic progress of rural development. For example, “On the Road to Revitalization” has established “grassroots liaison points” with 20 villages nationwide. Each quarter, reporters conduct follow-up visits to track the phased changes in these villages, compiling a “rural revitalization archive.”

Engage in immersive experiences and integrate into rural life and production. Take the initiative to immerse yourself in agricultural production, participate in rice planting and harvesting in the fields, attend village temple fairs and village meetings, and even engage in village affairs (such as explaining policies and mediating conflicts), transforming from an “observer” into an “insider.” For instance, when interviewing rural e-commerce operators, helping farmers take product photos and chatting with customers firsthand allows journalists to truly grasp the challenges of e-commerce, making the news more authentic.

Target niche groups to ensure comprehensive content. Journalists must not only keep a close eye on village officials and industry leaders, but also proactively engage with vulnerable groups such as the elderly, women, people with disabilities, and left-behind children to hear their most authentic voices. For example, in coverage of the “rural elderly care” theme, reporters should visit rural nursing homes and the homes of elderly individuals living alone to understand their actual living needs and challenges, rather than merely reporting the positive aspects while ignoring the difficulties.

4.2 Using insight to uncover the micro-mechanisms of rural revitalization: from “trend-following topics” to “value exploration”

Visual acuity is the foremost ability among the “four powers.” Only by seeing clearly can one identify valuable story ideas, helping journalists break free from homogenization and superficiality to focus on core values. Journalists must study policies such as the Central Committee’s No. 1 Document and the Rural Revitalization Strategy Plan to grasp the direction and key focus areas. They should also engage with villagers and resident cadres to identify where policy meets local needs. For instance, if a policy emphasizes food security but villages lack incentives for grain production, reporters can cover topics like grain subsidies and agricultural insurance. Beyond prominent topics like revitalizing villages through industry, we must also explore hidden themes such as rural culture, ecological governance, and the spiritual needs of farmers. For instance, when writing about depopulated villages, we can address issues like homestead management and attracting young people back to their hometowns. You must also exercise independent judgment, evaluating topics based on policy, social, and emotional value—don’t just cover whatever others report.

4.3 Refining the essence of rural revitalization through intellectual endeavor: from “phenomenon documentation” to “in-depth interpretation”

Mental acuity is the core of the “four capabilities.” Only by thinking deeply and thoroughly can journalists transcend the limitations of fragmented and superficial reporting to achieve breakthroughs in their thinking. Journalists should systematically study agricultural economics, rural governance, ecological conservation, and other relevant knowledge. They should actively participate in rural revitalization training programs to gain a thorough understanding of the background, objectives, and implementation pathways of policies. This will help them avoid falling into policy blind spots—for instance, by clearly distinguishing the respective responsibilities of the Rural Revitalization Bureau and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. Such understanding must be integrated with efforts to prevent relapse into poverty and foster industrial development. When conducting analysis, maintain objectivity by relying on “authoritative data + specific

case studies + expert insights." For instance, when discussing challenges in rural e-commerce, use data such as "logistics costs account for 25% of rural e-commerce expenses," paired with a case study of farmers suffering fruit spoilage due to delayed deliveries, and then invite experts to discuss solutions for improving logistics infrastructure. We must also conduct both horizontal and vertical comparisons. Horizontal comparisons involve examining differences among similar cases in different regions, while vertical comparisons track changes in the same case across different stages. For instance, by comparing ecological revitalization efforts in Anji, Zhejiang and Yulin, Shaanxi, we can identify the pattern that "southern regions prioritize ecological tourism, while northern regions focus on desertification prevention and control."

4.4 Writing the new era of rural revitalization with pen power: from "elite expression" to "humanistic transmission"

Writing skill is the cornerstone of the "four powers"; only when the pen comes alive can it convey warmth. Journalists must shed officialese and bookish language to truly move readers with emotion. When writing articles, adopt a story-driven narrative approach, placing characters at the core. Build the framework around "character stories + rural setting," capturing readers' attention through conflict, plot twists, and character growth. Crucially, delve into details—every word, action, and expression of the characters must be vividly portrayed. For instance, when writing about a young returnee, recount their initial entrepreneurial failures, collaborations with villagers, and aspirations after achieving success—bringing the character fully to life. Communication methods must adapt to different platforms. Television lends itself to long-form narratives, while short videos should be concise and impactful—1 to 3 minutes suffices. WeChat and Weibo emphasize interactivity, ideal for sharing rural knowledge or reporter updates with text and images, akin to reporting on agricultural technology outreach. Television can produce 20-minute documentaries, while short videos deliver "30-second smart irrigation tutorials." Official accounts can host expert Q&A sessions. Incorporate more local dialects and vernacular expressions, such as the rural Shandong phrases "gang sai lai" and "meo nei," or the ethnic minority terms "Torch Festival" and "Water Splashing Festival" from Yunnan villages, to infuse the report with authentic local flavor.

5 Conclusions

Rural revitalization is a systematic endeavor encompassing "industry, talent, culture, ecology, and organization." As "documenters, disseminators, and promoters," journalists' proficiency in exercising their "four capabilities" directly impacts the dissemination effectiveness and social value of rural revitalization reporting. The practice of China Media Group's "On the Road to Revitalization" demonstrates that only by grounding ourselves in grassroots communities with "footwork," identifying value with "insight," distilling ideas with "brainpower," and conveying warmth with "writing skills" can rural revitalization reporting possess both 'authenticity' and "intellectual depth," as well as "policy perspective" and "emotional resonance."

In the future, as the rural revitalization strategy continues to advance, journalists will face increasing challenges in effectively reporting on the advanced applications of "digital villages," documenting innovative models of "rural governance," and capturing the evolving cultural and spiritual needs of farmers. Only by continuously refining their creative approach—enhancing their "four capabilities" and adhering to a "people-centered" perspective while staying deeply rooted in rural communities—can they produce more high-quality works that reflect the rural revitalization strategy and resonate with audiences, thereby generating greater social momentum for comprehensive rural revitalization. Adhering to a "people-centered" creative approach, and staying "rooted in the front lines of rural areas," can we produce more high-quality works that reflect the rural revitalization strategy and resonate with audiences, thereby generating greater social momentum for the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas.

Funding

Footwork is the foundation of the "four capabilities." Only by "getting down to the grassroots" can one "bring back substantive insights." Journalists must break free from the comfort zone of "short, small, flat, and shallow" reporting and truly "dig deep."

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