

How 'Wang's Conjecture' report went viral

JOURNALISM

By ZHU HONGJUN

As algorithmic recommendation, short-form video, and competition for traffic increasingly dominate the news ecosystem, a broadly pessimistic view has taken hold in journalism: the public is drifting away from in-depth reading, fragmented information consumption is squeezing out serious journalism, and in-depth reporting is finding it increasingly difficult to reach audiences. Yet the recent viral success of "Wang's Conjecture," a 3,400-character profile published in *Guangxi Daily* on mathematician Wang Hong and her path to winning the Fields Medal, offers a compelling case for reassessing this view.

With its professional, finely crafted prose and deeply affecting narrative, the profile circulated far beyond expectations, sparking intense public discussion. After publication, copies of the newspaper—originally priced at 1.35 yuan—were resold on secondary platforms for as much as 65 yuan. Internet users have dubbed the phenomenon a rare "print-media spectacle" in an increasingly digital world. More strikingly, at a time when journalism itself is being questioned, countless readers left comments such as "journalism still exists," "a quintessential moment for journalism," and "still believing in the power of journalism."

What, then, enabled "Wang's Conjecture" to defy predictions of "the decline of serious journalism"? A report's impact is never determined by a single factor; rather, it emerges from the interplay of news production, narrative construction, and audience interpretation. How media organizations select and organize news resources, how texts shape portrayals of individuals and convey values, and how audiences engage emotionally and recreate meaning through reading—these three dimensions interact to form the underlying logic by which a work of journalism reaches beyond its expected audience.

Production logic

The viral success of "Wang's Conjecture" was no accident; it was the result of a news organization's long-term professional experience and editorial judgment at a critical moment. News does not simply replicate reality—it is shaped by the professional norms, editorial processes, and value judgments of news organizations. The production of "Wang's Conjecture" exemplifies this process of journalistic construction.

As early as 2025, after Wang Hong solved the three-dimensional Kakeya conjecture, reporters at *Guangxi Daily* began closely following her work. As the Fields Medal announcement approached, they did not have to start from scratch in search of an angle; drawing on this accumulated knowledge, they quickly developed a reporting plan. This capacity differs from the reflexive pursuit of trending stories in an era driven by online traffic—it depends on a news organization's long-cultivated powers of observation

and editorial judgment.

With direct sources of information limited, the journalists relied on professional judgment to reconstruct Wang's story. Wang herself was difficult to interview, her family declined all interview requests, and the award ceremony was held overseas, making the "first-hand interviews" central to conventional profile writing largely unavailable. The reporting team instead traveled to Guilin and Pingle County in Guangxi, interviewing Wang's childhood relatives and neighbors, her middle-school homeroom and subject teachers, and her university classmates, while also contacting academic peers. Each decision about whom to interview represented an act of gatekeeping. Through this process of selection and organization, the journalists constructed a coherent account of Wang's development—from her family environment and early education through university and, ultimately, international research.

The editorial stage likewise reflected the news organization's judgment and commitment to news values. After "Wang's Conjecture" began attracting attention online, the *Guangxi Daily* editorial team departed from conventional layout practices, deciding to run the feature as its front-page lead. Provincial Party newspapers commonly devote this prominent position to meetings, inspection tours, and speeches by senior Party



Chinese mathematician Wang Hong
Photo: CFP

construction determines whether it is remembered and widely shared. At the textual level, news communication produces meaning through headlines, narrative, and language. The broad circulation of "Wang's Conjecture" owed much to the careful crafting of the report itself.

Before the title was finalized, the reporter considered "Wang Hong's Conjecture." Its meaning remains almost entirely denotative: it accurately identifies the subject and event but leaves little room for further association. The final title, "Wang's Conjecture," by contrast, carries several layers of meaning. "Wang" suggests at least three things: first, a direct reference to Wang Hong's surname; second, the sense of "king" or "supreme"; and third, as interpreted by

Beyond the headline, the most crucial aspect of "Wang's Conjecture" is its distinctive narrative framework. Framing theory holds that media texts shape how audiences understand events by emphasizing certain facts while leaving others in the background; different framing choices can therefore produce markedly different interpretations and forms of emotional identification. When reporting on a mathematician like Wang Hong, focusing solely on her proof of the three-dimensional Kakeya conjecture and assessments from international peers would not only reproduce the familiar "genius narrative" but also distance her from ordinary readers. The reporters at *Guangxi Daily* instead focused on "how Wang Hong became the Wang Hong she is today." Rather than depicting her as a genius untouched by setbacks, they used telling details to trace the doubts, confusion, and choices that shaped her development—being questioned by classmates, feeling insecure in the presence of outstanding classmates, and spending six uncertain months turning away from mathematics to study architecture while abroad. These details dispelled Wang's mystique while making her more relatable. Audiences are not necessarily moved most by flawless figures—they may respond more strongly to an "ordinary person" whose experiences feel recognizably human.

"Wang Hong is so remarkable." Instead, details from her life allow readers to perceive her perseverance and resilience for themselves. This restraint did not leave the report feeling thin—rather, it gave the story a more lasting emotional impact.

Receptive resonance

Whether a text's narrative strategies achieve their intended effect ultimately depends on whether they resonate with audiences' lived experience and broader social sentiments. The power of "Wang's Conjecture" lies precisely in the way its story speaks to the pressures and uncertainties many people face today surrounding growth, competition, and life choices.

Today, the competitive pressures facing young people often make them reluctant to slow down. Social anxieties surrounding "rapid success," "effective effort," and "age-35 anxiety" continually push them to advance quickly and prove their worth. Wang Hong's life offers anxious young people a different point of reference. The value expressed in lines like "As long as you ultimately gain something, how long it takes doesn't matter—maybe others are a little faster, and you are a little slower, but that's truly okay" has become a source of reassurance and perspective for young people seeking to understand their own development. The report's portrayal of Wang Hong's upbringing also touched many parents and educators. The phrase "Her parents carved out a pure land for their daughter, and the growing Wang Hong began to spin in all possible directions" moved countless netizens and offered a quiet response to contemporary anxieties over how best to nurture children's development.

Uses and gratifications theory in communication studies holds that audiences are not passive recipients of media content but actively select and use it according to their own needs, seeking information, emotional compensation, or identity affirmation. After "Wang's Conjecture" was published, large numbers of readers reposted and commented on the story, while many sought out print copies of the newspaper as keepsakes. These behaviors went well beyond ordinary reading. Collecting and sharing the newspaper expressed both nostalgia for and recognition of print media, while also helping readers ease their own anxieties. British sociologist Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory holds that media texts do not have a single fixed meaning; audiences interpret them differently through the lens of their own experiences. The appeal of "Wang's Conjecture" lies precisely in its openness to multiple interpretations: scientists see a commitment to sustained inquiry, young people see perseverance along their own paths of growth, educators see an educational philosophy that respects individual development, and journalists find renewed affirmation of the value of their profession.

Zhu Hongjun is a professor from the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.



A front-page profile of Chinese mathematician Wang Hong, published by *Guangxi Daily* following her Fields Medal win, has sparked a rare rush to buy the print edition, with copies reselling for as much as 65 yuan (about \$9.60). Photo: CFP

and government officials. On July 25, however, *Guangxi Daily* gave it to a local mathematician taking the world stage—a decision that demonstrated the newsroom's willingness to break with convention. The paper then capitalized on the growing interest, quickly publishing related commentaries and responding to audience demand, extending the story from a profile to broader public discussion and interpretation.

Textual strategies

While news production determines whether content becomes visible, textual

readers, the journalistic credo "content is king," reflecting the professional ethos embodied in the report itself. "Conjecture" originally refers to a proposition believed by a mathematician to be true but not yet proved. The Kakeya conjecture puzzled mathematicians for more than a century, but the article extends the term further: it refers both to a mathematical conjecture and to a conjecture about one woman's path through life. The four-character Chinese title thus moves from signifier to signified, opening a space for imagination and interpretation before readers even reach the body of the article.

In *Writing Degree Zero*, French critic Roland Barthes argues that writing style is itself a choice about how meaning is conveyed. Restrained, transparent "zero-degree writing," free from rhetorical sensationalism, can often carry greater emotional force than deliberate appeals to emotion because it leaves the facts themselves to generate meaning. The first draft of "Wang's Conjecture" exceeded 6,000 characters; the final published version was 3,400. During editing, the author removed much of the emotive language and subjective commentary. Nowhere does the report directly declare that