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**Internet BBS Forum and News Reporting:
Towards an Enhanced Public-Government
Communication in China**

Introduction

The Internet in China and its democratic potential were under intense scholarly scrutiny from early 2000s. (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Yang, 2003a; Yang 2003b; Yang, 2003c; Li, 2003/2004; Shie, 2004; Chan & Leung, 2005; Massey & Luo, 2005; Zhou, 2005; He, 2006; Tai, 2006; Weber & Jia, 2007) Even though the high expectations given to the Internet based on its technological characteristics are undermined by media policies strictly controlling the Internet infrastructure and the content (Foster & Goodman, 2000; Deibert, 2002; He, 2003; Zhang, 2006; Weber & Jia, 2007), many China observers and scholars are still trying to find a way out in the fairly new online journalism. (Zhou, 2005; Lagerkvist, 2006; Tai, 2006; Wu, 2007)

This paper starts with a literature review on online journalism study in both context of established democratic countries and China. The review of online journalism studies in democratic countries is followed by a brief introduction of the Chinese media landscape. This explains why newspaper rather than other media has to be addressed in the analysis of online journalism in China. On the basis of literature review, the author argues that few researches on online journalism in China have attempted to assess how citizen journalists challenge the mainstream media institutions by influencing news selection and editing, and what role professional journalism (from a cognitive dimension) plays in this process. In the next section, the author introduces the aims of this paper – to find out whether the perceptions of the media text producers (journalists, editors and online citizen journalists) on the others contribute to a more integrated public discourse and government discourse; whether professional journalism influenced by political economic conditions and socio-cultural values affects the production of media text by professional media workers – followed by the introduction of the methodology. The next section analyses data collected from interviews with media text producers, media practitioners and government officials. The last section tries to summarise the findings from the preceding section and discuss the complexity of media practice of both professional journalists and citizen journalists.

Literature Review

Online Journalism Studies in Established Democratic Countries

Online journalism has attracted great interest in the academic world with the rise of online news media. Researchers from established democratic countries are interested in connecting citizen journalism with wider democracy through which the public can challenge the dominant discourse set up by a few media corporations. Studies of online journalism focusing on its democratic potential have yielded both positive and negative results. Many studies reveal that new genres of online journalism embedded in citizen news websites, BBS fora and weblogs empower the public by facilitating communication, rational discussion and the free flow of information. (Dahlberg 2001; Matheson, 2004; Chang, 2005; Kim and Hamilton, 2006; Robinson, 2006) Matheson's (2004) research looks into new trends in online journalism from the perspective of professional journalists. In his case study of the Guardian Weblog, he found that although journalists retain their authority as gatekeepers, the weblog 'engages in a different communicative endeavour to the dominant news practice, making less of a claim to know what readers want or to know what an event means'. (Matheson, 2004: pp460) Robinson (2006: pp81) also argues that 'postmodern journalism is tapping the door of the mainstream press'. Other genres of online journalism also play a positive role in challenging traditional news institutions. Through his study on Minnesota E-Democracy initiative that includes web forum and emails, Dahlberg (2001) argues the web forum and emails effectively extend the public sphere by facilitating rational, autonomous, equal, reflexive and sincere online debates. Citizen journalism in South Korea where information technologies are highly developed also provides alternative space for the public to form their opinion and agenda. (Chang, 2005: pp933) Together with citizen news websites such as *ohmymedia*, Bulletin Boards engage the public in real-time discussions that lead the political reform against conservative hegemony. (Chang, 2005: pp933)

On the other hand, a gloomy picture is also shown by other studies of different genres of online journalism ranging from news stories, news analysis, weblogs, BBS fora and online interviews, etc. As Haas documents, online journalism fails to fulfil expectations of the 'public's journalism' and tends to resemble mainstream media organisations in terms of news selection and editing. (Haas, 2005) The author also identifies how mainstream media influence weblog coverage, how elite blogs set the agenda for other blogs and how journalists act as gatekeepers. According to Deuze (2003), the BBS Forum is still a closed form of participatory communication because although it allows user participation, 'their communication acts are subject to strict editorial moderation and control'. For some traditional newspapers that have launched their online versions, the dominant position of reporters and editors is reflected in the fact the public is left with very few choices in terms of spaces and the topics on which

they are allowed to express their opinions. Others argue that citizen journalism such as weblogs and BBS still largely 'depend on how mainstream media take cues from their content', as 'the significance of the stories and opinions were felt only after the mainstream news media followed them up'. (Nip, 2006: pp227). Moreover, from a technical point of view, online journalism is not fully developed. As generalised by Deuze (2001), hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity constitute the key characteristics of online journalism. However in their research on Chinese online journalism, Massey and Luo (2005: pp367) identified a similar trend of web journalism elsewhere in the world – multimedia content was rare or not used at the web editions of the traditional newspapers.

Chinese Media Landscape

Observers and researchers from authoritarian countries with strict media control too, see citizen journalism as a way to challenge the monolithic media discourse which is likely to be defined by the states. However, citizen journalists enjoy less autonomy than their counterparts in the liberal democratic countries because of the stringent media regulations. For example in China, according to newly issued provisions¹ on online news service, ICPs and other websites can only carry news stories from the officially sanctioned news media which mainly refer to newspapers.

It is well known that media organisations in China are tightly controlled by the government. Despite de-ideologised media content since early 1990s, all media institutions including television stations, radio stations, newspapers (flagship or supplement)² and the infrastructure of the Internet are still owned and controlled by either government departments or the Party organs. Media were generally government/party mouthpieces if not spiritual apparatuses for ideological control. But since 1996 when the government initiated newspaper conglomeration to foster a more competitive media industry, the newspaper market saw an increasingly distinguishable genres, focusing either on government activities (flagship newspaper) or public life (supplement versions). Similar government-directed media reform was implemented in the television industry which was removed government subsidies. In order to reduce the cost, television stations hired private companies to produce programmes under the reform guideline of separating production from broadcasting. Apart from political news programmes, other programmes could be produced by private production companies and purchased by television stations. The same model was repeated with the Internet – state-owned infrastructure and a mixture of state-produced and private-produced content. Private ISPs and ICPs connect the Internet users to the global network in accordance with government regulations. However, for various media to operate with the market logic, the control of audience, readers and users is key to secure the advertising avenue. The old style of propaganda lost its appeal among the public after various media devoted their content to public life. More critical opinions appeared on the television programmes, newspapers and the Internet because they are more welcomed by the public than the mass line political

slogans. As a result, there is increasingly distinguishable genres mixed in all sorts of media— propaganda and public-oriented. The latter is increasingly substituting the former to become a major genre in the Chinese media. As the foci of the media content seem to shift from ‘political centre’ to ‘public periphery’, many scholars have been drawn to the new rise of the ‘public centre’ and its impact on politics in general. (Menon, 1988; Willnat and Aw, 2004; Windfield and Peng, 2005)

The Rise of Online Citizen Journalism in China

This shift accompanied the birth of the Internet and developed with the growing public use of the new medium. However, as Zhang’s (2007: pp59) study reveals, a unitary public sphere is unlikely to be created by citizen journalists from BBS forum in China. Nevertheless, citizen journalists can foster a counter-public sphere against the state and commercial interests. Zhang’s case study of an online discussion board (Rear Window to Movies) reveals that alternative voices about Chinese movies are formed on this discussion board which provides discursive spaces for people who have different point of views regarding Chinese movies. (Zhang 2007: pp51-60) Yang (2003c) also argues in his study that online activism such as environmental online bulletin board has evolved into offline grassroots activities, challenging the top-down politics model in China.

The notion that the media should serve public demand regardless of the Party guideline reached its peak in 2003. In both media coverage of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)³ and Sun Zhigang’s case⁴, online journalism and citizen journalism played a very positive role. (Nip, 2005; Tai, 2006) The value of citizen journalism is best manifested in time when traditional media go against the public’s will in order to follow the Party mandate, or when traditional media are slow to follow up breaking news that raises great social concerns. Hao (2006: pp69) argues that Chinese media have neglected their surveillance function in order to obey the orders of the Party, leaving this task to be completed by the people in SARS epidemic. Nip (2005) analysed news reporting on SARS in mainland China and Hong Kong, and she argues that in mainland China, new technologies such as the Internet has enabled citizens to act as news sources and publishers at a time when the free flow of information is suppressed in the mainstream media.

Since then there have been increasingly more online discussions on issues concerning people’s interest, most of them calling for judicatory justice for individuals. In the past two years, the online discussions have gone beyond the scope of individual justice appeals and are more likely to be related to issues of public interest such as income disparity, medical care, housing and education, etc. Some of the issues have been followed by government reactions and some have been adopted into the government agenda, e.g. reducing income disparity.

The wider inclusion of the public is also manifested in pro-active initiatives such as

newspaper-website interaction⁵ taken by mainstream media institutions. One of the most successful metropolitan newspapers, *Southern Metropolis News* pro-actively takes cues on news sources collected from its website – Aoyi Net. Web users are able to provide news sources by uploading textual, photographic, audio and video documents through interactive communities provided by the website. 100,000 news sources were provided by the website through its news source reporting channel, weblogs, fora, chat rooms, online communities and news comments. (Lan, 2007: pp119) The report on the earthquake on 26th December 2006 was based on a post on Aoyi Net by a resident in Shenzhen. (Lan, 2007: pp117) For some party newspapers, the interaction between the traditional newspaper and the web becomes the pre-requisite for the survival of the Party newspapers under the conditions of the market economy. (Zhu⁶, 2007: pp85)

Methodology

Even though Chinese citizen journalists are increasingly integrated into the mainstream media institutions, researches on how they influence news selection and production in practice are still limited. This is partially because of the strict media regulation that limits the development of online journalism.⁷ Given the persistent media censorship in China, the major concern will be how online journalism can challenge the mainstream media institution without overthrowing the existing media system.

A good venue to explore the democratic function of the online journalism is from the perspective of journalistic professionalism which is becoming dynamic and fragmented under current social condition in China. (Chen, 2006; Lee et al, 2006) Deuze argues in the multimedia and multicultural context, journalists ‘negotiate the core values that the occupational ideology of journalism at work’ (2005: pp458). The same applies to Chinese journalists who are facing the same challenges and at the same time struggling between the Party line and the market line. In the elective democratic countries, journalism as ideology was never made clear – who are a ‘real’ journalist and what are the examples of ‘real’ journalism. (Deuze, 2005: pp444) Whereas in China journalistic professionalism imposed by the Party bears strong legacy from class struggle and spiritual apparatuses. Journalists do not have any ‘particular belief’ as their improved financial status is consistent with the developmentalism promoted by the government (Lee et al, 2006: pp595). This however contradicts with normative journalistic ethics such as freedom of expression and public watchdog that have become valuable in practice since the media reform in 1990s. With the increasing ‘public focus’ in the media reform, the market force has drawn the journalists back to the public’s side. Pan (2000) points out that Chinese journalists through their ‘innovative and non-routine activities’ construct the organisational settings in which the Party logic is compatible with market demands in the context of journalism reform since mid-1990s. The author is right to point out that

the contest between market force and political control has contributed to the change in the journalistic professionalism in China over the last ten years. Therefore journalism as both an ideology imposed by the Party and a professionalism practiced by media workers is constantly contested and negotiated between political force, market force and moral standards. Drawing upon the concept that professional journalism can be used for social control (Singer, 2003), the author argues if the professionalism in China is fragmented (Pan, 2003; Chen 2006; Yin 2006), it may reduce the organisational or institutional control of reporters and editors. On the other hand, it may also re-shape the meaning making processes in the mainstream media institutions on the bases of journalists' perceptions of themselves and online journalists. However, an enquiry into the success of online news and online journalism should also include questions such as political economy, consumption and newsroom organisation. (Matheson, 2004: pp461) It is therefore this paper's intention to explore further from the perspective of professional journalism, together with their political economic status and socio-cultural background to understand how the rise of online news media and online journalism may affect professional journalists' work practice such as news reporting and news selection; how professional journalists' changed perceptions towards citizen journalism have contributed to their acceptance of the public into the news production processes.

As my previous research on media text has shown, public discourse is increasingly independent from the government control by using alternative information source and anti-thematizing the official discourse. (Gong, 2007) The official discourse is drawn to issues of public concerns from the public's perspectives. The research has also shown an over-reliance of the public on the journalists to form their own agenda and to make validity claims. All these findings are pointing to a weakened domination by the official newspaper and a more integrated public-government communication. This paper tries to provide more empirical evidence for the enhanced public-government communication (media discussion of income disparity) from the perspective of media text producers including journalists, editors, and forum participants. This research focuses on the media coverage of income disparity issue on *Qiangguo BBS Forum* (the most politically critical BBS forum in China), *People's Net* (People's Daily's online community), *Southern Weekly* (China's most critical broadsheet weekly) and *People's Daily* (the Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper).

This research is operationalised by analysing how citizen journalists on the Internet BBS forum can affect news reporting and news selection by journalists and editors in traditional newspapers. The bigger question behind this analysis is how public input is gradually adopted by mainstream discourse and whether this has contributed to the enhancement of public-government communication. I particularly focus on the way political economic conditions and socio-cultural values affect professional journalism. The data of this analysis come from my interviews with journalists, editors, BBS forum participants and administrators from the selected media. It examines the political-economic status, socio-cultural background of the authors who produced

these media text on income disparity. Interviews with newspaper journalists and editors intend to understand professionalism among media workers, what are their criteria to decide what issues enter the public domain? How do they understand online citizen journalism and how do they connect online journalism with their own work? Interviews with the Internet forum participants are designed to discover how the public connect their media use with their wider socio-cultural background, their criteria, values and norms; how they consider journalists and what role they think they can play in social change by using media? Officials from media regulatory bodies are also interviewed to understand the government attitude towards the adoption of public input from media.

The above-mentioned interview questions as a whole evaluate how news stories are thematised, and whether the online citizen journalists have any impact on the agenda setting of the mainstream newspaper, whether equality has emerged between the public discourse represented by the BBS forum and official discourse represented by *People's Daily*. Overall, from the perspective of journalist professionalism this paper evaluates the factors contributing to the increasing interaction and equality between newspaper journalists and citizen journalists, and analyses whether the interaction and equality have resulted in a greater integration of the public input into the mainstream newspapers and hence an enhanced public-government communication.

Findings

Mutual Reliance

As identified in other online journalism studies, official mainstream media are increasingly showing reliance on citizen journalists. In this case journalists/editors in traditional newspapers are drawing on online grassroots reports by Webloggers and forum discussants to find their news sources. When asked whether they will follow up an online grassroots report, an editor from *People's Daily* said:

*Absolutely. These grassroots reports contain a lot of personal experiences which can be used as good news sources. And some of the experiences are closely related to pressing problems that need to be resolved. I'm still proud of our report on big queues in the bank. Our journalists queued for 50 minutes for a money transaction. I experienced similar thing before. After our report, China Bank Regulatory Commission issued an order to rectify this problem.*⁸

Meanwhile, online grassroots reports are also treated very cautiously in terms of their credibility and authenticity by traditional newspapers. A journalist from *People's Daily* said:

I browse posts and personal blogs online very often because I believe they are very

*valuable as news sources. One thing we need to consider is the authenticity of these sources. It is very strictly regulated in our newspaper that NO direct quote from the Internet can be used. We need to do research on them and collect evidence. Once I went to Nanjing and Hebei to talk to people to verify one of our online news sources.*⁹

Considering online citizen journalism as a positive social movement, an editor from *Southern Weekly* explains that why online grassroots journalism is embraced by traditional newspapers:

*A citizen's movement that evolves on the Internet is the healthiest way. It is also the most difficult one to be controlled by the government. Citizens are like nodes on the Internet. Each one seems fragile but in fact all these nodes are powerful by connecting with others...*¹⁰

The practice of media professionals to incorporate public input into the mainstream media institutions is not suppressed by media regulatory bodies. This, as the author will explain later, is how open-minded media professionals negotiate with the government in a covert and piecemeal way. In an interview with an official from the Central Propaganda Department of the Party which controls the ideological content of the Internet, she said:

*The Central Propaganda Department of the Party is not blocking public opinion on the Internet and as a matter of fact, it is not possible. But we do have an internal mechanism that passes the public opinion to the relevant functional department. We have staff watching all kinds of information on the website. Once the information is significant enough, the related problem is directed to certain government departments.*¹¹

The setting up of the internal mechanism shows that the Central Propaganda Department of the Party has already acknowledged the value of online public opinion. In turn this also shows the non-hostile official attitude towards online public opinion which may thrive under the existing political structure.

However, the official media's (*People's Daily* and its online community *People's Net*) dependence on online journalism is based on the two-tier model identified by Lee et al (2006). In this model, the first tier flagship publicises the Party's policies, legitimise its mandate to rule and contributes to the establishment of cultural and ideological hegemony. The second tier seeks to entertain and inform the readers while contributing to the social construction of human relationships and knowledge. The re-analysing and re-interpreting of the news collected by the central media (first-tier media) by the second tier media are more motivated by ideological considerations in China. According to an interview with an editor from *People's Daily*, this model is confirmed. Reports from their journalists sent in from all over the country will go through the first and second tier selection and news reports with more national

relevance and positive meaning go to the *People's Daily* while the rest are selected to go to *People's Net*.

*The stories carried by the People's Net are selected from the 'left-over' stories by People's Daily. Most of the time, these stories are less significant and more politically controversial. In particular stories with negative influence but closely connected to people's concerns may go online but not on paper.*¹²

On the other hand, citizen journalists such as BBS forum participants also show increasing reliance on traditional newspapers. For some of them, the official background of the media (*Qiangguo Forum's* strong connection with *People's Daily*) reinforces the authority of the forum.

*The reason that the Forum can attract attention from the government is exactly because of its nature – it belongs to the online community of the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party – People's Daily. (Banong Guocui)*¹³

Another forum participant believes that the function of enhancing public-government communication of the forum can be improved by changing its affiliation. He also points out that *Qiangguo Forum* is an effective tool to enhance public-government communication, especially when it invites government officials or scholars to join live discussions:

*People's Net is not really a government functional department, but it tries to perform some functions of the government and this might not be effective... If People's Net is an independent medium that only aims at advertising itself by strengthening its role of publicising peoples' concerns and publicising government policies, the forum would work better. (Zi chengjing Yueguo)..., inviting government officials and scholars to live discussions on the forum is an economical way to get to know what the public think and receive feedback from the public.*¹⁴

In the analysis of media text on *Qiangguo Forum* (Gong, 2007), posts with personal experiences receive a small number of hits and are followed by a few supporting posts. The posts that are most viewed and discussed are critical news reports pasted by forum participants from traditional newspapers. It is very often that forum participants only paste these reports from other newspapers even without including their own comments. This seems to show that forum participants generally agree with the journalists whose reports they are posting and use their reports to make their validity claims. This total trust on journalists however, undermines the potential of the forum participants to form their own agenda. Moreover, this entrenches the traditional newspapers' position in dominating the media discourse.

Traditional Newspaper Domination

Traditional newspaper journalists dominate the increasingly mutually dependent relationship because of their easy access to mainstream media and their elitist position. Most of the time the journalists and editors deny their powerful position in media practices based on their access to media. But in reality their self-centred elitist position is maintained in terms of news selection and news reporting. Their professional ethic to speak for the public good however is based on their own judgement of what are the issues of public good and what is worth reporting. When asked whether they feel more powerful than other people because of their access to media, an editor said:

*Of course the right to speak represents power. This right should be used with determination to safeguard public good without considering too much personal interest...*¹⁵

When asked how to decide what topics to follow on the website when they all seem to represent issues of public concern, he replied:

*I don't really follow up issues just because they are reported by grassroots journalists. The major criterion is to see whether these issues fit into my own agenda. That's to say, in terms of choosing online hot topics, I play a decisive role.*¹⁶

Another editor and a journalist also deny the fact that they are empowered by their access to media, although they both acknowledge the difference that media access can make. They attribute a wider social influence of theirs to the newspapers:

*The newspaper is very influential, which is shown in the degree of reactions from central government departments and other local governments. We exert our influence through the newspaper. However the influence of journalists per se is minimum, if separated from the newspaper they are working for.*¹⁷

*I don't think I have too much power, in particular political power by having access to media. I might have some influences though. This is decided by the nature of the newspaper as the official newspaper of the Central Chinese Communist Party. It enjoys high authority and is read by high-rank government officials. Therefore issues covered by People's Daily are more likely to be resolved by government departments. It is wrong to say that the Party newspaper has lost its value to exist. Under the existing political system, internal democratic mechanism is still effective to resolved problems.*¹⁸

The 'internal democratic mechanism' referred by this editor means a mechanism that allows critical reports within the Party system. For instance, *Internal Reference*¹⁹ is an internally circulated confidential document among the Party members. Critical reports prohibited in the media to avoid having negative influence on the public are allowed in *Internal Reference*. Comparing *People's Daily* with *Internal Reference*, he

is speaking of the pragmatic role of *People's Daily* as an elite Party member newspaper which has limited reach but huge influence.

The connection between government department and official media with a public focus is also confirmed by one of the directors of *Qiangguo Community*²⁰:

*We have many cases that the posts of forum discussants are followed by government department responses. But the most common way to report issues raised by forum discussants is through Internal Reference.*²¹

The domination by mainstream media is also reflected in the complaints of the forum participants. Their most frustrating experience in the forum is that their most pressing issues are not given enough attention either by the forum moderator or other forum participants.

*The most depressing experience is my voice from the bottom of my heart is only heard by myself. (Banong Guocui)*²²

*My concerns of big social issues cannot be supported by the forum moderator. (Wuming Guashou)*²³

*The most frustrating experience of mine is: forum participants are sometimes very indifferent to significant social problems. (Bangjia Zhenli)*²⁴

*I don't have too many frustrating experiences. But what I worry is that the ethos of the forum is not upright. Forum participants have their fixed way of thinking, for example which social system is good and which is bad. There is a lack of rational thinking. But the forum moderators don't sympathise with my worry and they think it is none of my business. (Furong Yinshi)*²⁵

Paradoxical Public Perception on Traditional Media and Their Practices

It is interesting to notice that the public represented by forum participants do not see journalists being able to represent the interest of social low classes in the media debate of income disparity. This is not consistent with their actual practices in the forum where they post reports from traditional newspapers without including any comments. It seems that they are satisfied with journalists' report and so let the journalists speak for them. In seven interviews conducted with forum participants, none of them believe that journalists can represent under-privileged social classes.

Both journalists and forum participants are very complex social groups. Although some of them managed to speak for the under-privileged classes on the newspaper or on the forum, this does not mean they can truly represent the under-privileged classes because of their own economic status. In the end it is a 'sympathy' or a 'cheap mercy'.

And this cannot change the life of these under-privileged people. Under-privileged people can only be represented by themselves (in political sense). (Bangjia Zhenli)²⁶

Instead of counting on journalists, another participant also points out that it is political right that is needed for the low-income population.

Media cannot represent low-income population. As a platform, it only represents itself. The only thing needed for low-income population is their political right and this cannot be represented by media. This need can only be satisfied by market, then by constitutional democratic political system. If the existing political system cannot balance the disadvantaged position of low-income population, the society will go more unbalanced. Media are totally powerless – both administrative power and money can control media. (Zi Cengjing Yuoguo)²⁷

These thoughts seem to contradict the practices of forum participants in the media debates on this issue – they simply paste reports from other newspapers to make their points. When asked why, one forum participants offered the following explanation:

You need to think the real relationship between forum participants and the forum moderators. I'd say inmates and wardens. Although this is not said, it is well understood by the forum participants. Reports copied from other newspapers are simply easier to pass through the moderators' censorship. Probably the moderators feel safer to release posts like this – if anything goes wrong, it will be the fault of the newspaper where the report originated. (Banong Guocui)²⁸

This coincides with findings from my earlier research on media text analysis (Gong, 2007). Pasted posts with some critical edge from other sources are far more viewed and supported than the ones with merely participants' personal experiences. Yet the public's trust towards traditional newspapers needs more scrutiny as the government censorship on media seems to complicate the issue. To some extent, the seemingly loyalty of the public toward newspaper journalists can be an expediency to disguise their own agenda. The sweeping conclusion may not hold true in the context of China in which media censorship persists. It is necessary, therefore, to explore the agenda and motivations from the journalists' perspective to understand what kind of reports are made available by the journalists for the public use (quoting and pasting).

Political and Economic Conditions

In terms of the income disparity issue, it is commonly agreed by forum participants, media scholars and even some officials from media regulatory bodies that journalists cannot represent the interest of the lower social classes because of journalists' economic conditions. This viewpoint, however, is too general from my interviews because it neglects the fact that economic conditions among journalists may vary based on the orientation of the newspaper they work for and their occupational

education that influences their journalist practices. For example, the economic condition of journalists and editors in *People's Daily* does not look very promising compared with their counterparts in market newspapers. In an interview conducted with a journalist from *People's Daily*, she acknowledges the difference of milieu in the South and North, and in market newspaper and the Party/government newspaper:

There is comparatively speaking less political sensibility in journalists in the South. When I say south, I particularly mean Guangzhou and Shenzhen where newspaper market is very lucrative. Monthly income of journalists can be as high as ¥8000-9000.

Market newspaper journalists normally earn more than we do. But if I'm working for money, I will not work as a journalist in People's Daily. We have more social responsibility as we have higher platform to influence the society, whilst for market newspaper journalists, their primary goal is to attract eyeballs of the readers.²⁹

It is exactly because I am a journalist in People's Daily that is highly associated with the Party, I dare not to take gift money as journalists from other newspapers. And these gift money is acquiescent in this profession and taken by everyone. This is why sometimes my colleague from market newspaper can earn twice as much as I do...(People's Daily journalist A)³⁰

But for those editors who are in charge of newspaper management and advertising, there are generally very wealthy, and some of them can be millionaires. A deputy editor of a metropolitan newspaper who is responsible for advertising made this comparison:

There isn't really too much difference between very rich people and middle class who play important role in maintaining social stability, in terms of life quality. They (very rich people) go abroad for holiday and me too; they go to work by car and me too, but maybe rich people drive BMW and I drive Honda Accord...Journalists work for metropolitan newspaper can earn slightly more than their colleagues in the Party newspaper, but their pressure is huge and their living expectations are high – buying a flat, a car...³¹

It is obvious that he considered himself as middle class. Later when asked to clarify the demarcation of rich class, middle class and the well-off³² class, he identified the well-off class as having monthly income of ¥5000-6000, with ¥100,000-200,000 bank deposit; the middle class as millionaires; the very rich class as unknown. For journalists (market oriented newspaper) in particular, he said:

They should be considered as middle-upper group in all salary earners. But the reason that they report income disparity is not because of their own interests, but their social responsibility.³³

It is interesting however, to discover from interviews with the *People's Daily* journalist and editor that they would try their best to incorporate their personal concerns such as high prices for properties into their news agenda:

I never counted on the People's Daily to report systematically income disparity or property prices. It is not possible for People's Daily to over-expose already very serious issues – this will make people all over the country think worse of the situation... But of course I want these issues to be addressed because I need to buy a flat one day. But I probably will find another perspective that can be easily accepted, making it look like a suggestion rather than pure criticism. Little by little, I will try to push the problem to be solved. After all personal concerns are the most inspiring element of finding a news story. (People's Daily journalist B)³⁴

Most journalists and editors interviewed consider that they are decently paid. In addition, most of them feel that they have considerable social influences based on their status. Some openly told me that they did not want to get involved in very sensitive research project that may cost their jobs. Journalists and editors in the *People's Daily* emphasised they had a very good platform to work with, which is associated with their political influence.

For some senior journalists who are in charge of reporting certain government department, they can be very close to the leaders of these departments. They could directly go to these leaders and tell them certain issues need to be addressed. They don't even need to write a report on these issues.³⁵

Professionalism

Professionalism in journalism is, as other studies find, inconsistent and fragmented in China. This is partially due to media reform in which professional journalism is torn between market forces and political control. The different perceptions of journalist ethics are based on the nature of the newspaper (flagship or supplements) and the location of the newspaper (Beijing, Guangzhou and other area). On the other hand, previous journalistic education may also affect the perceptions of journalists/editors on news values.

A journalist talked about her previous professional education:

The slogan for our school is: educating master-hand for mainstream media³⁶. There is an extreme focus on Marx and Lenin's thoughts, the leadership of the Party, and the perspective from the people. We learn western journalist skills, but the guideline is still very Chinese.³⁷

As a master's degree holder in journalism, she obviously uses more media jargon.

Party line seems to be one of the features of her university's curriculum – one of the most prestigious universities in China. The comparison of her university with other universities indicates that journalist education in her university focusing on social responsibility under the guidance of the Party enjoys an elite position. In addition to the educational elements, the different academic background of the journalists is also one of the factors that affect their practices.

*Editors and journalists come from wide range of disciplines, such as law, politics, economics, international relations, etc.*³⁸

This claim is confirmed by my own experience that nearly half of the journalists/editors interviewed do not have a journalism degree. The Party-indoctrinated professionalism in the university education had huge influence on journalists/editors, which led to constant self-reflections. Strong self-censorship was noticeable in my fieldwork in that almost every interviewee asked for an interview outline before the official meeting. In their work practice, they would generally suppress their own agenda to make sure the Party's agenda is reflected in the newspaper. However, they would also sneak in some personal agenda under the disguise of public concern.

For some, journalist professionalism bears a strong pragmatic character. The resolving of the queuing problem illustrated by a *People's Daily* editor does not relate to income disparity issue. However from another angle it demonstrates the fact that in a de-ideologised Party newspaper, the daily concerns of the people is becoming a major area to find news stories. And it is possible for journalists and editors to form their own news agenda despite enormous consideration of whether their reports will violate the Party principles. It is not surprising to notice that many newspaper journalists and editors use round-about ways to achieve their goals, both based on personal concerns or larger social responsibilities. An editor from *Southern Weekly* repeatedly emphasises the role of media to change the society in an incremental and piecemeal fashion.

*Every single article I wrote, every book I edited and I wrote can be considered as an edge ball*³⁹. *I cannot change the framework (media censorship) overnight because it seems stable and invincible, but I can gradually shift the boundary by going a little cross the bottom line. I will try to bend the rule as long as I have chances.*⁴⁰

This way of thinking is closely associated with the Chinese cultural context in which disputes are not settled in a confrontational manner. The situation is further complicated by different stakeholders that advocate for their own interests – regional media and their regulator, departmental regulator and national regulator, etc. It is exactly because of these conflicting interests that, media are given great leverage. The same editor gave this example to illustrate this:

There is a report about a household that refuses to relocate as required by Chongqing municipal government. The pictures are published on the website and this household is supported by the Internet users who believe the government is abusing its power on its powerless people. As this report is considered to have very negative influences, Chongqing municipal government ask the state media regulatory bodies to block this news. However, this news is still available online for three more days just because the Party propaganda department in Chongqing cannot persuade the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that controls these regulatory bodies to block this news.⁴¹

The case that this editor has given demonstrates another complication in media regulations in China. The hot news on the website attracts hits and therefore increases potential advertising revenue for the website. The website and other content providers care more about their profit than the face of Chongqing municipal government which had no jurisdiction over them. Therefore the Chongqing municipal government had to appeal for aid from the Central Propaganda Department of the Party which is the paramount media regulator. But all this red-tape takes time. Three days later the Central Propaganda Department ordered this news blocked from all website. However, for the Internet news, three days means national dissemination of the message.

This incremental approach to change the media from government mouthpieces to spaces where public's voices can be heard is considered by some media practitioners as the most effective measure. Echoing the editor of *Southern Weekly*, the founder of *Qiangguo Forum*, the ex-director of *People's Net* explained his gradual success in setting up a space such as *Qiangguo Forum* with some potential for public opinion expression:

*I want to create a space that people can talk from the bottom of their heart...Online forum was not acceptable by the leaders back then. They were like Big Letter Posters from the Cultural Revolution. These posters were used by both Party leaders to attack their political opposites and by the public to attack their leaders. How could they tolerate things like this? But with the chance of NATO bombing the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia, I created a forum called 'Protest the Violence of NATO BBS Forum'. I know this can't be wrong because it enabled the Chinese to expression their nationalism. And this is in tune with our government stand – we were not on good terms with the US anyway. And of course the leaders didn't say anything against the forum, so I reckon I can keep this forum even after anti-American wave was gone. A month later, the forum was re-named as *Qiangguo* (Strengthen the nation) Forum. I know this can't be wrong neither as the patriotism is also on the government/party agenda...⁴²*

The lengthy extract from the interview shows that media practitioners with a clear agenda to put the media at the disposal of the public tend to use every possible way to influence the overall framework of the controlled media institution. In making the

effort to change this framework, they have to feel out the reaction of their leaders and try to push forward their agenda with tremendous courage. What he has done to open up the space for public discussion on an official medium is considered a very brave endeavour by his colleagues in other official media. Unfortunately, fighters such as the ex-director are not too many in number within the existing media system:

*Media workers like us will always want to do something for the public, although there are not too many of them.*⁴³

*The younger generation of journalists were so ambitious with the ideals and dreams to enter into this society. After three years of being a journalist, they became depraved and lost in other people's misery. What we need now is the faith to make a breakthrough... There are not too many journalists can be as optimistic as I am...*⁴⁴

*The ethics of journalism changed with the change of social values. What young people including young journalists value most is the ability to get rich. The pragmatism is also reflected in current journalist practices... The old style journalism – party line and public good is to some extent, gone.*⁴⁵

The government does not suppress the agenda of a small number of media practitioners to create an open and free media public sphere. Instead, the government is increasingly tolerant of topics that can be politically sensitive, and a great amount of attention has been given to online media such as *Qiangguo Forum*. This is reflected in the fact that an increasing number of government officials including the Prime Minister have joined online discussions on the Forum. However, this government-public communication can be superficial and manipulative. It is undeniable that many officials in media regulative bodies are still very resistant to freer online news and freer media in general.

Conclusion and Discussion

Similar findings have emerged in this paper as in other studies of online journalism. There is mutual dependence between traditional newspaper journalists and online citizen journalists. The former mainly rely on the latter to discover news stories while the latter use newspaper reports to reinforce their arguments. In the Chinese case, the latter's dependence on the former cannot be concluded because the government censorship on media seems to complicate the motivation of the public to use traditional newspapers. The traditional newspaper reports may be used as disguises by these forum participants to express their own critical opinions.

The domination by the traditional newspaper journalists/editors is also identified on the bases of their easy access to mainstream media and their gate-keeping position. Nevertheless, in the current political milieu, everyday concerns identified on the

forum seem to be the most important areas of news selection for traditional newspaper editors and journalists. This change forces the traditional newspaper journalists/editors to draw on online grassroots reports. Online journalism adds weight to market force to push further the public orientation of the media. Therefore the mutual dependence between online grassroots journalism (representing the public discourse) and traditional newspaper journalism (representing the government discourse) has to some extent enhanced the public-government communication by creating a more public-oriented media sphere within the mainstream media institutions. This communication is also enhanced by the internal democratic mechanism set up by the government.

For certain issues such as income disparity, the potential of traditional newspaper journalists to represent the interest of under-privileged classes is limited due to their own economic condition. However, their shifted focus towards public concerns and their adoption of online grassroots journalism to the news production processes may help them to form a more rigorous agenda for the under-privileged population. Apart from political economic status, socio-cultural values that affect journalist professionalism are important factors to decide news agendas of traditional newspaper journalists and other media practitioners. For instance, the gradualist and roundabout approaches that are valued as pragmatic in Chinese culture are used by some media practitioners. These values are also noticeable in the boundary-pushing practices among the forum participants who bring in their own opinion by posting critical reports from other newspapers. Together with journalists' changed perceptions on online citizen journalism, these approaches are starting to change the mainstream media institution. But inconsistent journalist professionalism affected by journalists' previous journalist education, media reform and social value may result in great difference in their perceptions of online grassroots journalists, and therefore may affect the extent to which online journalism can challenge the mainstream media institution.

Notes:

¹ Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services, jointly issued by the State Council Information Office and Ministry of Information Industry in September 2005.

² The flagship newspapers focus on serious themes such as policy announcement, propaganda while the supplements focus on entertainment and issues more related to public life. With less propaganda, the supplements are largely receiving more popularity than the flagship newspaper among the public. The subscription, retail and advertising avenue of the supplements become the major incomes of the newspaper agencies.

³ A news report warning the epidemic nature of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) from *Southern Metropolis Daily* was widely spread on the Internet. Internet BBS Fora and mobile SMS became major news sources for the public after the Chinese government closed down reports on SARS in the traditional media. Information disseminated online was picked up by overseas media which drew

attention of the World Health Organisation. The international community pressurised the Chinese government to cooperate with the other countries to curb the disease.

⁴ In the same year, Sun Zhigang, a university graduate was tortured to death during his detention in a police station in Guangzhou. Under great pressure from media reports and public concerns expressed online, the local government arrested culprits who were responsible for Sun's death and they were sentenced to prison terms or death penalty. (Tai, 2006, ppXIII) More importantly, Sun's death resulted in a review of the detention and repatriation rules by National People's Congress (NPC). A year and four months later, State Council repealed the old detention and repatriation rules on 7 September, 2004.

⁵ A term used by media practitioners recently, indicating a mutual beneficial relation between traditional newspapers and their value-added websites. *Bao Wang Hu Dong*

⁶ The author is the director of Henan Daily Newspaper Group which is led by the flagship Party newspaper – Henan Daily.

⁷ Webloggers are permitted to write news stories on their own weblogs, however the information is merely for personal use and can reach small number of people. There are strict regulations on posting news stories on BBS fora too. Any news intended for mass disseminating must come from traditional media or licensed news websites and must be referenced. The constant updating of the fora makes these news stories disappear every minute. It is however true that these forms of online journalism provide information which can only be accessed by media workers.

⁸ Personal interview with People's Daily editor A on 9 Aug 2007. (For those interviewees who have required anonymity, they are only referred by their official positions. Letters are used to distinguish interviewees with same official position.)

⁹ Personal interview with People's Daily journalist A on 11 Aug 2007.

¹⁰ Email interview with Southern Weekly editor on 8 Oct 2007.

¹¹ Personal interview 18 Oct 2007

¹² Personal interview with People's Daily editor B on 10Aug 2007

¹³ Personal interview 29 Sep 2007

¹⁴ Personal interview 28 Sep 2007

¹⁵ Email interview with Southern Weekly editor on 8 Oct 2007

¹⁶ Email interview with Southern Weekly editor on 8 Oct 2007

¹⁷ Email interview with Southern Weekly journalist on 1 Dec 2007

¹⁸ Personal interview with People's Daily editor B on 10Aug 2007

¹⁹ Internal Reference, *Nei Bu Can Kao*

²⁰ Qiangguo Community is the community that Qiangguo Forum as its flagship, belongs to. There are other fora such as in-depth forum, real name forum in this community.

²¹ Email interview with Deputy director of Qiangguo Community on 25 Oct 2007

²² Personal interview 29 Sep 2007

²³ Personal interview 25 Sep 2007

²⁴ Personal interview 25 Oct 2007

²⁵ Personal interview 6 Oct 2007

²⁶ Personal interview 25 Oct 2007

²⁷ Personal interview 28 Sep 2007

²⁸ Personal interview 29 Sep 2007

²⁹ Personal interview with People's Daily journalist B on 19 Oct 2007

³⁰ Personal interview with People's Daily journalist A on 11 Aug 2007

³¹ Personal interview with a Deputy chief editor from a metropolitan newspaper on 10 Oct 2007

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- ³² Well-off, *Xiao Kang*
- ³³ Personal interview with a Deputy chief editor from a metropolitan newspaper on 10 Oct 2007
- ³⁴ Personal interview with People's Daily journalist B on 19 Oct 2007
- ³⁵ Personal interview with People's Daily journalist B on 19 Oct 2007
- ³⁶ When asked to clarify 'mainstream media', she gave me the example of People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and Internal Reference, which are all government/party media that are not driven by market profit.
- ³⁷ Personal interview with People's Daily journalist B on 19 Oct 2007
- ³⁸ Personal interview with People's Daily editor A on 9 Aug 2007
- ³⁹ A term originated from table tennis rule. It indicates that someone can get away with punishment by only slightly breaking the rule.
- ⁴⁰ Email interview with Southern Weekly editor on 8 Oct 2007
- ⁴¹ Email interview with Southern Weekly editor on 8 Oct 2007
- ⁴² Telephone interview with former director of Qianguo Forum and People's Daily on 26 Oct 2007
- ⁴³ Telephone interview with former director of Qianguo Forum and People's Daily on 26 Oct 2007
- ⁴⁴ Email interview with Southern Weekly editor on 8 Oct 2007
- ⁴⁵ Personal interview with a Deputy chief editor from a metropolitan newspaper on 10 Oct 2007

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