



Emerging networks in the global news arena: Theorizing the structural role of Chinese bridge blogs

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Nan Zheng

James Madison University, USA

Stephen D Reese

University of Texas at Austin, USA

Abstract

In this article, we present a theoretical approach to conceptualizing the global news arena as a structure of relations formed across media systems worldwide, relations mapped by hyperlinked connections across online news platforms, including professional news sites, blogs, and other social media. Specifically, we argue that bridge blogs serve as the ‘weak ties’ (in Granovetter’s terms), linking cultural spheres formed by the ‘strong ties’ among traditional national media. Using China as the national context, we provide an overview of the phenomenon of bridge blogs, presenting an illustrative example to show how bridge blogs are positioned to provide contextual information and interpretation of events and issues in China to be better understood by overseas audiences.

Keywords

Bridge blogs, China, global news arena, network society, weak ties

Globalization can be seen in the interlocking relations and interdependencies among distant events and phenomena. Global warming, economic crisis, and violent extremism all have origins and influences that go beyond single nations and even bilateral coalitions. Accordingly, debates over these sociopolitical issues occur within a globalized public sphere, a space of multi-level interconnectivity and reflexivity, mediated through

Corresponding author:

Nan Zheng, School of Media Arts and Design, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA.

Email: zhengnx@jmu.edu

a global communication network constituted by institutional media, citizen journalism, and social media sites that transcend national boundaries and broaden political participation on a global scale.¹

As an integral component of this global public sphere, news production and dissemination can no longer be accurately captured by the concept of ‘foreign’ or ‘international news’ as defined by nation-state boundaries. We argue that a network approach best describes this space of news flows, a structure of relations formed across media systems worldwide and defined by increasing connections across distant places in the world – a perspective missed in traditional models of news flow. In this article, we seek to develop this theoretical framework, show its utility, and illustrate it empirically. Specifically, we identify structural holes, a concept describing disconnected areas in a network, as a fruitful site to study emerging media platforms that function to ‘bridge’ the gaps in the exchange of information and perspectives. In network terms, these ‘bridges’ serve as the ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1982), linking cultural spheres formed by the ‘strong ties’ created by traditional national media.

To exemplify this function, we choose to examine *bridge blogs* – the current events blogs that write about and translate local happenings for overseas readers (Zuckerman, 2008). Empirically, bridge blogs can be mapped by their hyperlinked connections that facilitate cross-references and mutual awareness, cutting across national and professional boundaries. Using China as the national context, we provide an overview of these bridge blogs and provide one illustrative example. We further showcase their theorized role, reflected in their structural location, which also shapes their content structure to add contextual interpretation of stories in China to be better understood by overseas audience.

Theorizing global journalism

What constitutes the ‘global’ in the news media system? This question accompanies the perceived importance of the Internet and social media platforms and has resulted in theorizations of global journalism that focus on three major interpretations based on (1) geographical reach of media platforms, (2) transnational media ownership, and (3) global standards of professional norms and practices. Although inter-related, each emphasizes a different aspect of the *global* and shapes how media power is conceptualized. By examining each perspective, we intend to point out a largely overlooked dimension of the global media system, through which power is articulated and media representations realigned from traditional models of news flow. Our own network-related theoretical framing of global journalism helps reveal an important dimension of bridging power that allows an increased flow of information and perspectives across different cultures and locations.

Seeing media power expressed in geographical reach, one line of research has often equated global media with transnational satellite news channels, able to cover multiple geographical regions in the world (e.g. Chalaby, 2003; Volkmer, 1999). Historically, this approach followed the rise of CNN during the first Gulf War, when satellite technology enabled these channels to reach audiences on a global scale (Cushion, 2010). Over the years, new additions to the global media club, such as Al-Jazeera, have supplied a

contra-flow of news and perspectives to Western-originated channels such as CNN and BBC World (Volkmer, 2002). This emphasis on international platforms, however, overlooks the potential 'global outlook' of any news content (Berglez, 2008), which can be identified with discursive features such as references to international sources, reporting styles and selection of topics with cross-boundary origins and outcomes (e.g. Cottle, 2011; Olausson, 2013) – an insight that informs our approach in this essay.

A political economy perspective emphasizes power as wielded mainly through the transnational expansion of media ownership, resulting in the flow of media products from a few Western countries to the rest of the world (e.g. McChesney, 2000; Schiller, 1991; Sparks, 2007). Even when a global media brand tailors its content to serve local market tastes, it is viewed as a commercial strategy to expand the global logic of the parent company (Thussu, 2007). Rai and Cottle (2007), however, found a greater diversity of commercial ownership structures among media companies across nations, regional channels that serve particular geo-linguistic areas (e.g. Al-Jazeera), and a substantial presence of nonprofit broadcasters. This increasing stratification of ownership challenges the global domination of a few media brands but still does not capture the more complex network features that interest us here.

Finally, researchers have examined the extent to which a global news platform is constituted by shared norms and practices that transcend any given national culture. For example, one of the most comprehensive studies of world journalists from 31 countries and regions found similarities as well as variations in the perception of journalism values and ethical standards (Weaver and Willnat, 2013), with other scholars supporting a more universal 'journalism culture' through cross-national comparative analysis (Hanitzsch, 2009). From an institutionalist perspective, national journalistic cultures are semi-autonomous professional logics (Benson, 2006) that tend to resist pressures toward transnational homogenization (Benson and Hallin, 2007), but recent comparative studies have addressed the emerging transnational influence observed across national media outlets (Benson et al., 2012; Esser, 2008). As Esser (2013) argues, media systems are 'no longer isolated, self-contained units, but embedded in an increasingly globalized communication system characterized by a multiplicity of diffusion, dependency, exchange, and integration, and this has consequences' (p. 119). We seek to examine the consequences of this connectivity.

The above perspectives depict power exercised through representations with massive 'global' reach, concentrated ownership, and unified professional outlook. We offer an alternative way to examine the underemphasized and less visible interconnectedness in a global media system – particularly relevant to the pattern of linkages associated with digital platforms. By recognizing the networked structure of the global news arena, we do not intend to dismiss the unevenly distributed power seen in the scale of transmission, ownership, and journalistic practices, but rather to address an important blindspot in understanding the global media environment. As a way to fill this theoretical vacancy, Castells' (2009) network society perspective leads us to adopt two conceptual shifts: first, instead of emphasizing the distinction of media outlets based on their national identity (i.e. national and international), we focus on examining the interaction of those different modes of communication in the larger global sphere; second, since citizen-based media and traditional mass media contribute to the same global media ecosystem, we

recognize the increased accessibility and diversity in information exchanges across distant publics.

As part of this networked system, news outlets within and across national boundaries – both professional and citizen-based – increasingly interact with one another in a ‘global news arena’, formed by the increasing mutual awareness and interactions among regional, national, and local media outlets as well as user-generated online content (e.g. blogs and online discussion forums) (Reese, 2008). Such mutual awareness and interactions are accomplished when news events and public opinions are repackaged to reach audiences in distant places and also when international media coverage is informed by local views. As a result of those engagements, one can expect to see a news environment, in which ‘people know how they are portrayed, and others know that they know (or soon will)’ (Reese and Dai, 2009: 223). Following this network perspective, we see power realignments in the connectivity aspects of media and the ability to bridge previously empty spaces. Thus, global journalism does not ultimately create a homogeneous public sphere for a world audience but provides a ‘global outlook’, alternative voices to nation-centric dialogues and chances for more direct encounters among distinct part of the world.

The importance of ‘bridges’ in the global news arena

In a multifaceted online media environment, power manifests itself in the absence and establishment of connections across the world. Accordingly, we apply two network concepts to understand it: the *structural hole* that describes the absence of connections in the network and the *weak tie* that refers to the connection across the isolated parts of the network. To the extent media outlets bridge the information gap between different cultures and distant geographical places, they in effect provide the weak ties to close these structural holes.

In a loosely connected journalistic network, the disconnection between media outlets in politically and culturally distant parts of the world can cause the emergence of structural holes, which describe the absence of links between different parts in the network (Burt, 1995). Examined empirically, structural holes can be observed as the lack of hyperlinks across national media outlets (Chang et al., 2009; Himmelboim, 2010) and also in the nation-centric linking patterns in the US political blogosphere (Reese et al., 2007). These holes in the online news environment indicate the absence of mutual awareness and references among world regions. This cross-national disconnect is also manifested in national news organizations oriented toward domestic interests in their reporting. In the selection and presentation of foreign news events, national media become a site for nations to domesticate and thus reinforce their enduring values and ideologies (Nossek, 2004). Nation-centric coverage becomes most salient in stories of international conflicts, in which national policy propositions are closely followed and national interests supported (Chang, 1999; Kim, 2003; Zaller and Chiu, 1996). In sum, regardless of the Internet’s potential to increase interconnectedness in global news communication, the institutional news environment still consists largely of closed hyperlinked national circles with rare connections in between, leading to structural holes. Indeed, such persistent ethnocentrism reflected in these patterns of media connections led Hafez (2007) to declare media globalization a ‘myth’.

These structural holes in international news coverage partially reflect the imbalanced news flow (e.g. Wu, 2003) and the problematic representation of developing nations (Atwood and Murphy, 1982), concerns once so central to the New World Information and Communication Order debate. The current global media system has a more dispersed power structure than the communication space centralized around the First World countries described by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report in the 1980s (MacBride, 1980). The online environment enables citizen reporters to provide first-hand reporting from foreign countries as well as to help circulate news content to complement, compete with, and critique professional news coverage of foreign affairs, enriching and broadening the perspectives world audiences can receive (Hamilton and Jenner, 2004; Trammel and Perlmutter, 2007). What makes the networked environment more open and diverse is the increasing role non-traditional media organizations, including blogs, play in the production of news (Benkler, 2011). In the relatively 'flat' online communication space that consists of many linkable news sources, citizen media outlets are effectively co-equal content producers sharing this space with professional journalists. Some compelling cases of such amateur foreign reporting can be seen in the emerging citizen media platforms in the coverage of the Iraq War, Middle East, and Arab Spring (e.g. Heller, 2005; Hermida et al., 2014; Wall, 2005).

The metaphorically labeled 'bridge blog' is one of the emerging citizen-based foreign news providers that, we argue, serve as the weak ties to close the structural holes in the more conventionally defined global media system. Ethan Zuckerman (2008), the Internet activist and founder of the international blogging community site 'Global Voices', defined blogs located in between the local and global community of communication as 'bridge blogs'. For Zuckerman, bridge blogs stand out from other types in that they write about local issues and news for overseas audiences. While traditional mass media outlets provide 'boots on the ground' reporting of a foreign country, bridge bloggers are primarily curators and translators of local information and need not necessarily be physically in a location to provide their perspective and opinions. The network location of bridge blogs is consistent with the brokerage role that is assumed in the network concept of weak tie (Granovetter, 1982) and structural hole (Burt, 1995), revealing their importance in spanning across otherwise separated social groups. Similarly, these bloggers explicitly positioned their blogs at the intersection between the localities they intend to bridge, which often lack cultural, political, and geographical connections with one another.

However, when it comes to the direction of information, we should acknowledge that bridge blogs technically do not resemble the kind of bidirectional or multiple directional flow of information that takes place as part of the cooperation and collaboration process among disconnected social groups shown in studies of entrepreneurs, institutional networks (Burt, 2004), and online gamers network (Shen et al., 2014). From the consumption point of view, this contra-flow mainly travels in one direction, from the world regions that are covered to the intended overseas audience. Yet, when we look at how bridge blogs produce content, especially in their choices of hyperlinks, the references to media outlets from both sides of the bridge are inevitable. There is a two-way quality to their bridging function, in their *positionality* if not *directionality* of flow, because of their strategic interconnecting location. Beyond traditional notions of 'flow', they create a communicative space in which news coverage, analysis, and opinions are brought

together to create knowledge of a world place, informed by sources both inside and outside of that locality.

To identify bridge blogs, Zuckerman (2008) suggested two key criteria: (1) a blog is extensively linked to by other bloggers from countries that do not share a border or common language and (2) written in other than the dominant language used in the locality featured in the blog content. These criteria provided good starting points for classification but can be problematic when used to understand bridge blog brokerage location and practice. If we follow Zuckerman's first criteria, we will find blogs that indeed gain attention from a geographically distant place. However, the references from distant geographical locations are the *outcomes* rather than the *practices* that lead them to become bridging actors and fulfill their bridging role. Instead, we see bridge bloggers, intentionally seeking to link to both inside and outside of the locality, as well as to both professional and citizen-based media. Having carried out this work, these bloggers place themselves in a brokerage location to facilitate the circulation of information and opinions across the structural holes they intend to close. The language choice of a blog, the second criteria, only reveals a portion of the relevant practices. Besides the translation of content for an outside audience, bridge blogs also have the potential to create alternative perspectives, innovative ideas based on rival ways of thinking, which eventually can help to break away from nation-centric discourses. To study these practices, one must look into the content structures that bridge blogs develop to conduct meaningful conversation across the structural holes. In sum, to understand their brokerage location and function, we suggest an empirical strategy to relate the hyperlink relations of bridge blogs with others in the online communication network with their actual communication practices and content structures.

This framework takes a different approach than previous studies, in which the attributes of an online news site – such as the political and economic status of the sites' home country (Himelboim, 2010) or political orientation of blogs (i.e. liberal, moderate, and conservative) (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Meraz, 2009) – are used as the predictor of their hyperlink patterns. Instead, we take the *relations* that one forms with others, rather than the *attributes*, as the independent variable that can affect one's social behaviors. More specifically, in the case of bridge blogs, we examine to what extent bridge blogs' network locations inform as well as shape their communicative practices. To apply this empirical framework, one needs two sets of data: first, the hyperlinks that are sent out and received by bridge blogs that help identify their network location; second, the actual content structures as reflected in their reporting and perspectives. The hyperlink data can be gathered with automatic linking crawling software, which traces the links from a sample of online content unit (e.g. news story and blog post) obtained from the media outlets (Bruns, 2007). Then, systematic evidence of content structures is needed regarding the substance of these bloggers' work. In our theoretical and empirical framework, we consider the network location of bridge blogs as the defining characteristic of their practices – and in our next section show how it helps them to bring local discourse and explanations of local values to audiences outside of China.

Bridge blogs about China

Although global in a networked sense, bridge blogs are still geographically rooted, and their communicative practices still must be observed with respect to specific local

contexts, although we argue that the dynamic of bridge blogs theorized here is more widely generalizable. The popularity of bridge blogs mainly depends on whether the location they blog about and/or from attracts overseas attention. For instance, there is increasing international attention paid to English-language blogs from Middle East countries because of the US military presence, terrorist attacks, and the uprising social movements in the area. In addition, blogging about a nation with a censored media system and limited access by the international media makes the information from relevant bridge blogs more valuable for the international community. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the most widely read and influential bridge blogs are often from authoritarian nations.

As one of the nations that provide fertile soil for the growth of bridge blogs, China is a hotspot in media coverage around the world, but its coverage in the English-language media still leaves a lot of untold stories, unexplained issues, and underrepresented geographical areas. And the media content coming from China's side is largely unpopular or inaccessible to the outside audience. China state media have made their content available overseas, but government control has contaminated its credibility as reliable news sources. Although recent evidence has shown that Chinese citizen media (e.g. blogs, online forum, and micro-blog) are also under systematic censorship (e.g. Bamman et al., 2012), they publish coverage and public opinion that are valuable resources not available to the outside audience, mostly due to the language barrier. The work of foreign correspondents is still the most accessible information source about China for the world audience but faces the limitations from Chinese government media regulation as well as resource constraints in keeping up with a geographically large and internally dynamic country. In our opinion, China provides an extreme test of how even a media-controlled environment can be bridged to the culturally disparate English-speaking world.

The blogs that are featured in this article write about general public affairs categories such as social, political, and cultural issues about China, which separate them from personal blogs documenting bloggers' daily life in China for family and friends or writing about a special topic in China (e.g. technology, business law, and fashion) targeting a particular professional group. Also, none of these blogs are affiliated with professional media outlets, which we consider comparable in function to their affiliated professional news organizations. English-language bridge blogs that write about China emerged more than 10 years ago. Since the year of 2010, the discontinuation of a few high-profile bridge blogs has raised concerns about the so-called 'death of the China blogs' (Kuo et al., 2010). However, an annual best China blog list showed that more than 100 new bridge blogs about China emerged from 2010 to 2014 (Goldkorn, 2014), growth explainable by the increasing demand of China news from the English-speaking world (Lee et al., 2015; Pew Research Center, 2011). Bridge blogs have migrated in part to other social media platforms, with bloggers expressing their opinions, sharing their blog content, as well as aggregating news content through micro-blogging site 'Twitter' (Burger, 2010a). Nevertheless, the demand for the function these bloggers provide ensures the dynamic we study will continue, regardless of the ebb and flow of specific platforms.

This study provides a snapshot of a bridge blog community by including some of the most active and well-known blogs at the end of 2010, which are mostly the pioneers and veterans of bridge blogs about China. Many of them started their work because they saw the gap between what is available through Chinese media (both professional and

citizen-based) and coverage of China in English-language media. One of the first in China, Roland Soong (2006), writing a bridge blog since 2003, sees it as a value-added service to the English media coverage of China. Based in Hong Kong, Soong drew on media content from greater China area and other Asian countries to provide a wider range of news stories and extended coverage on issues surrounding China. Jeremy Goldkorn, the founder of the popular bridge blog Danwei, dedicated his blog to translating Chinese media content, which he described as a dynamic reflection of China's modern society but largely unavailable to outside China. To help outside readers get a direct glimpse of what is on Chinese people's minds, the bridge blog *ChinaHush* has been providing translations and explanation to the active discussions spreading across China's major online forums, social networking sites, and e-mail forwards. In sum, since the awareness of the gap that exists between China and the English-speaking world gave birth to the bridge blogs in China, they started with the deliberate goal of playing the brokerage role, with the appropriate communication practices.

Whether physically located in China or not, bridge bloggers and their readers are a type of transnational elite. As such, they do not resolve information divides, but they exert their influence by adding more knowledge and diverse articulation about public affairs in China to the global news arena, rather than through a global scale of production and reception. Bridge bloggers vary in their nationality and professional background. Some have considerable experience in media, while others are professionals who have long experience of working and living in China. Some use blogs to share academic expertise about China. The audiences of bridge blogs about China are English speakers, with interest in learning news and perspectives about China, further revealing the liaison role of these platforms. According to the third-party web traffic estimations (see Table 1 for Web traffic estimation from Alexa²), the majority of the audience is located outside of China. In addition, a survey study of foreign correspondents stationed in China found that they often use bridge blogs as a general source of information or as a place to spot emerging stories (MacKinnon, 2008). These findings suggest the indirect influence that bridge blogs may have on a much broader audience overseas via their connections to traditional news organizations.

Case example: China's Nobel Peace Prize winner

To provide illustration of bridge blogs' network location and practices, we chose to examine the case of Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo. The case selection is informed by the theoretical approach that the empirical study of global journalism should seek to understand 'the workings of the global in specific local places, where the universal and global becomes particularized and local' (Reese, 2010: 351). In Liu Xiaobo's case, such dual process of global communication is happening: the recognition of the Nobel Peace Prize as a high-profile award (given to a jailed Chinese political activist for the first time) brings ample amount of media attention on China across the world, while Liu's globally recognized political petition for multi-party democracy evoked domestic discussions of his influence on China's domestic civil society. Thus, with both global media attention and local influence, this case will illustrate the work of 'bridging', when the global perception of a local place is put in conversation with local perspectives.

Table 1. Bridge blogs about China.

Blogs	Blogger's background	Starting time	Percent of site traffic from outside of China ^a
Peking Duck	Public relation professional	2002	77.1
Danwei	A group of contributors including former media workers	2003	79
EastSouthWestNorth	Media researcher and translator	2003	58
Shanghaiist	Former media professionals and Chinese Americans	2005	73
Global Voice Online	Citizen bloggers in China	2005	n/a
The China Beat	Contributors at the University of California, Irvine	2008	78
ChinaGeeks	Americans who live in China	2009	100

^aWeb traffic estimation from Alexa (see Note 2).

The following analysis is based on two sets of features obtained from individual blog posts. First, we utilize a Web crawling tool, IssueCrawler,³ to map the hyperlink network surrounding eight selected bridge blogs⁴ by tracing the links originating from a sample of 45 blog posts collected within the month after Liu's award and then the links in the content units (e.g. web page and blog post) that are linked to by the blog posts. It is because bridge blogs often depend on other sources, either from inside or outside of China. Therefore, tracing the links two steps from the bridge blogs can truly capture the origin of the content they try to bridge. Second, we provide qualitative analysis on an example of blog posts and try to show how distinctive perspectives connected through hyperlinks are organized. This case example makes no claim to represent the overall population of bridge blogs in China, but we use it to showcase bridge blogs' network location and practices.

Based on the two-step hyperlinks data retrieved by IssueCrawler, the network surrounding selected bridge blogs contains a variety of information sources, China and otherwise (see Figure 1 for a network of sites connected through bridge blogs). For example, some major Chinese official press organizations, such as *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency* (Xinhuanet.com), are included as well as mainstream news outlets from English-speaking countries such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *Wall Street Journal* (blogs.wsj.org), *Time Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*. Besides the professional media sites, this network also contains social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Tudou (a video sharing site in China). Also, a few Asian media sites (e.g. Asia Times) and media research institutions (e.g. China Media Project affiliated with The University of Hong Kong) are shown in the hyperlink network of bridge blogs, which shows the connection to the surrounding geopolitical region.

Bridge blogs' network locations are reflected in their betweenness scores, which indicate to what extent they connect between two disconnected nodes in the network (Monge and Contractor, 2003). We used UCINET 6, a network analysis software, to calculate Freeman Betweenness scores on all the sites in the network identified by IssueCrawler. Overall, bridge blogs, including 4 as the starting points and 6 identified through the

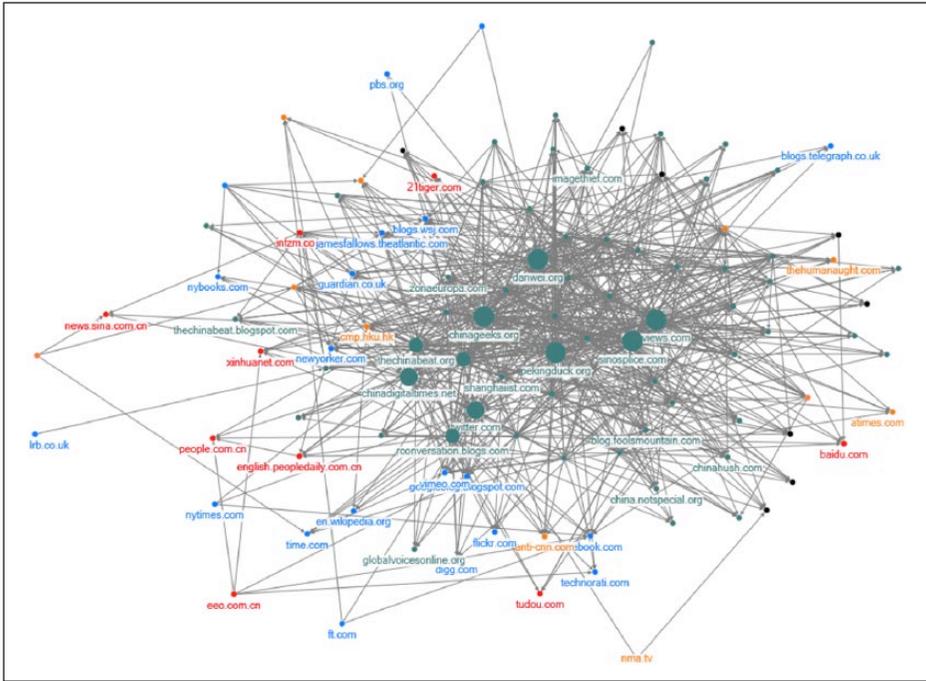


Figure 1. Hyperlinked network surrounding bridge blog posts discussing Liu's Nobel Peace Prize.

The size of nodes represents their level of betweenness in the network. Green denotes bridge blogs; red, Chinese media sites; blue, media sites originated from Western, English-speaking countries; and orange: others (Asia media sites, research intuitions, etc.).

two-step hyperlink tracing process, are ranked as top 10 on the betweenness score among all information sources appears in this network (see Table 2). In other words, this result indicates that the removal of these bridge blogs, as the interconnecting points between otherwise disconnected sites, will result in the appearance of gaps in many parts of the network. Bridge blogs indeed serve as important bridges between information sources from distant parts of the world – both professional and citizen-produced that otherwise lack hyperlinks to each other.

Bridge blog posts provided a diverse discourse that not only includes disputed views on this controversial event but also helps to communicate local views to the outside audience and bring the global view into dialogue with local voices. More specifically, bridge blogs' content contains Chinese citizens' reflections on the influence of the Peace Prize on China's civil society, critical thinking regarding the practical value of Liu's political proposal to China's democratic process, and a direct engagement with nationalistic views.

One example of how bridge blogs recognize Chinese citizens' indigenous views can be seen in a post published by Global Voice Online (GVO), which aggregated and translated several Chinese bloggers' comments on the implication of Liu's award

Table 2. Top 10 sites with high betweenness centrality.

Ranking	Bridge blogs	nBetweenness ^a
1	danwei.org	6.445
2	sinosplice.com	4.364
3	shanghaiscrap.com	3.272
4	cnreviews.com	3.025
5	pekingduck.org	2.919
6	thechinabeat.org	2.814
7	chinageeks.org	2.765
8	farwestchina.com	2.136
9	chinadigitaltimes.net	2.109
10	chinalawblog.com	1.893

$M = 0.45$; standard deviation (SD) = 1.01.

^aFreeman node betweenness is used to calculate the nbetweenness scores in this table.

(Kennedy, 2010). In this post, GVO cited a US-based Chinese blogger who expressed disappointment over Western media's narrowly framed understanding of the influence of the Nobel Peace Prize as giving support to elite human rights activists in China. Instead, this blogger pointed out that the most important ramification of the Peace Prize is to generate meaningful dialogue between supporters of nationalism and liberal democratic ideals in China. In the same post, GVO translated words from another young Chinese blogger, who claimed to have no knowledge of Liu's work but was moved by the incident to reflect on his own political belief. He wrote that the Cultural Revolution was his parents' generation and 4 June (Tiananmen Square protest) was his sister's, and then he posed the question, 'What are the ideals of our generation?' In another example, the Chinese scholar Chaohua Wang, who signed Charter 08, wrote a blog post in *The China Beat* to offer an explanation of what 'peace' means in China's context. She argued that

It [the Peace Prize] raises the question of whether peace and prosperity must be grounded on equal civil participation by members of the society, instead of on the basis of coercive stability with the State presiding over an obedient population. (Wang, 2010)

Here, a social value used by the international community to judge China is taken and articulated in the context of China's society.

Roland Soong, the blogger at EastSouthWestNorth (ESWN), urges his readers to engage in a careful reading of Liu's original political writing. He questions the number of signatures on Charter08 (Liu's proposal for political reform) received by supporters in China as the sign of broad support reported in a news article published by the *Christian Science Monitor*. Linking to his earlier post on the influence of Charter08, Soong (2009) draws on the analysis of China's primary social classes and suggested that

For starters, why not take Charter 08 and discuss it with (1) a white-collar worker in a city; (2) a migrant worker in a city; (3) a peasant in an impoverished mountainous village? ... Maybe

then you will understand what the problem is: namely, there is a huge disconnect with the abstract notions espoused in Charter 08 and the daily realities of the masses.

In this case, ESWN served as the ‘weak tie’ that juxtaposed the optimistic estimation of Liu’s influence by the foreign media with the doubts of his practical value from inside China. Also, ESWN opened a door for the world to gain a more nuanced understanding of the class segmentations and dynamic interests rising from the domestic civil society of China.

Bridge blogs also directly address the nationalism sentiment critical of the Nobel Prize for imposing a Western value on China’s society. One such direct encounter with this nationalism was seen in Peking Duck’s response to an editorial piece, titled ‘Is there a “plot” among the Western countries against China?’ in *Global Times*, a Chinese newspaper (with both Chinese and English edition) produced under the support of the *People’s Daily*. Richard Burger, the blogger at Peking Duck, argued that the criticism of China’s human rights condition is not conspiracy, but rather a way for the international community to hold its members accountable. In the comment section of this post, Burger (2010b) pointed out the origin of the conspiracy argument:

This mindset, that the Party is omniscient and can be trusted to choose what we read and see and hear, is cultivated with endless zeal by the Party to keep the people in its grip. It is used to keep the people hyper-nationalistic, convinced that ‘the West’ is engaged in a conspiracy to damage China, to make them believe the West is China’s enemy, to keep them convinced that China is a ship in a tumultuous storm, and unless these mind-control devices are exercised the ship will capsize.

Thus, when bridge blogs act as participants in the discussion across national and cultural values, they help to generate deeper understanding on the points of divergence between the indigenous and English-speaking world.

In this case study, the hyperlink analysis shows how disconnected sites are bridged in a network cutting across distant part of the world and media resources with different professional affiliation. As showed in the brief analysis of the bridge blogs’ content, these insiders of China’s social reality provide local information and ways of thinking not otherwise available to the outside audience. At the same time, they identify information and comments about China coming from the outside world and help to address them with the benefit of local context and perspectives, in the process creating a multimodal globalized space.

Conclusion

In this article, global journalism has been approached as a ‘sensitizing’ concept, which in Blumer’s (1954) distinction guides the search for empirical evidence. In developing a framework for such empirical research, we further refine this conceptualization as rooted in the global news arena, a news gathering and distributing network marked by the quality of mutual awareness and understanding that transcends national boundaries (Reese, 2010). This global communication network is clearly exemplified in the online world, where news stories and their platforms are literally connected to each other via

hyperlinks, forming a space of interconnected media outlets with different regional and national origins around the world. Within this space, we pointed to a specific structural location where the cultural, language, and geographic limitations across world regions on information access leaves communication gaps. These gaps, structural holes in network terms, give rise to bridging media platforms that exert influence based on their interconnections and the communication practices helping to overcome these social barriers in the world. Bridge blogs are one important example of these platforms, providing a journalistic analog to the weak tie relationships in social networks. Thus, the impact of the bridge blogs should not be examined strictly based on their readership numbers, but rather we must assess the alternative knowledge they offer to broaden and contextualize news coverage produced by international media. We have argued that this is a form of power over media representation, not captured by traditional models of international news flow focused on global geographical reach, transnational ownership, or universalized media professional practices and norms.

Liu Xiaobo's case showcases the bridging practices in a high-profile case, which generated ample amount of discussion both within and outside of China and a communication gap due to the cultural and ideological nature of the event. Thus, this is an ideal illustration of the bridging practices in a nutshell but cannot provide a complete understanding of their performance. Future studies can obtain a representative sample of bridge blogs' daily performance in a longitudinal time period to help test what and how they actually help to bridge a nation to the rest of the world. Moreover, comparisons of bridging practices in different national contexts would help extend the scope of the study beyond high-profile areas in the world such as China and English-language population as the targeted audience. Bridge blogs are only one of many tangible media platforms where cross-national bridging practices take place. Future studies should explore this bridging phenomenon in other media platforms where people are publicly sharing news and opinions, allowing the study of network connections in a variety of forms (e.g. retweet, share links and mentions). In general, the network perspective proposed in this study provides a theoretical basis and empirical framework for large-scale quantitative analysis of bridging practices, where 'big data' reveal network location not otherwise easily discernible. Then, the different network characteristics can be further explored through targeted qualitative and quantitative examination of bridging media content. (For recent other network-oriented approaches in China, see Chen and Reese (2014) and Reese (2015).)

Recent studies of global journalism have focused on the usage of social media by professional journalists to do research and collaboration in a transnational story (Gearing, 2013), as well as to cover breaking news, promote their news organization, and interact with audience (Vis, 2013). Besides seeing social media as simply reporting and promotional tools, studies of bridging media platforms like this one add to the empirical understanding of the horizontal network of mass self-communication and network journalism, in which social media further the cross-national flow of information beyond the work of professional correspondents themselves.

As we have suggested, bridge blogs are part of the global media system in creating spaces and providing greater connectivity transcending national boundaries. The importance of bridge blogs in that system must be understood in the context of the global public

sphere, which is not a single space but a loosely integrated, deterritorialized ‘multilayered structure of publicity’ (Hjarvard, 2001: 34). Bridge blogs bring local news and values to overseas audience by raising awareness of social issues concerning specific localities particularly those with government imposed censorship, where they can subvert state power over media by making it increasingly difficult for national governments to hide wrongdoing or social unrest from the outside world. Moreover, bridge blogs help bring local public opinion to the global audience, facilitating the representation of a variety of local voices. Indeed, as many news organizations around the world cut resources for foreign bureaus, alternative news platforms such as the ones we have examined will play an important role in filling the resulting gaps in international coverage. In sum, as long as bridge blogs – or equivalent platforms and practices – continue to actively pursue this form of cross-national communication, they can make a positive contribution to a globalized discursive space and, as we hope to have shown, are worthy of research attention.

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Notes

1. The global public sphere is invoked here as a general concept, but its full explication is beyond the scope of this article. Our meaning is similar to Volkmer’s (2014), who provides a recent theoretical engagement emphasizing deliberate global interconnectedness.
2. Alexa, an Internet research company, provides traffic data of websites based on usage information collected from a group of users who agree to install software that tracks their Internet browsing behaviors. The percentages of visitors from different countries are projected numbers based on usage information obtained from Alexa’s participant pool.
3. A brief introduction of IssueCrawler outlining its operation and explaining the functions of its different settings can be found at http://www.govcom.org/Issuecrawler_instructions.htm. According to the instructions on IssueCrawler’s website, the crawler is given the following settings to compose a social network: Iterations of method (co-link analysis): 1 Crawl depth: 2 Privilege starting points (on) Link analysis ‘by page’ (based on blog posts).
4. Starting with a handful of well-known bridge blogs (e.g. Danwei.org, ESWN), we searched their blogrolls and content to find more blogs that fit the criteria of bridge blogs as described above. Eventually, this study identified eight bridge blogs that are frequently mentioned by the well-known bridge blogs and also exhibit some variety in bloggers’ background, preference in news topics and writing (see a list of bridge blogs in Table 1).

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Author biographies

Nan Zheng (PhD, University of Texas) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Media Arts and Design at James Madison University. Her research focuses on two major themes: the impact of new media on global news communication and the economics of new media. Her most recent work utilizes network analysis to investigate how current events blogs targeting overseas readers bridge the gaps in global news communication.

Stephen D Reese is Jesse H. Jones Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the Moody College of Communication, University of Texas. His research interests include the sociology of news, globalization, and framing of political issues, and most recent edited volume (with Wenhong Chen) is *Networked China: Global Dynamics of Digital Media and Civic Engagement* (Routledge).