

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Citizen Journalism IN THE Global News Arena: China's New Media Critics

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Optimists about globalization often argue that its processes inexorably yield greater transparency. Powerful pressure is being exerted on journalism itself, they observe, which must now serve multiple global audiences, many of whom are equipped with sufficient information from alternative media to challenge mainstream news reports. Professionals have been placed in dialogue with citizens, the latter with their own forms of expression distributed easily through online platforms. Traditional forms of news reporting, when subjected to such scrutiny and critique, risk appearing problematic.

A particularly compelling example of this practice of journalistic critique is found in China, where in spite of remarkable strides in economic and social development, the likelihood of greater transparency has been brought into question. A highly developed communication structure provides ever-growing capacity for citizen journalism and public deliberation but provokes government attempts at control. The number of Chinese internet users now surpasses that of the United States, but centrally guided human monitoring and computerized filtering continue, leading to direct and self-censorship. Official management of the online environment does not mean, however, that significant openings within the society have not taken place, but they must be understood in the right framework. Here we want to consider this deliberative space with particular interest in the forum it provides for media criticism by citizen journalists. Indeed, we may go so far as to

expect that the emerging engagement with journalism by citizens in China will help produce higher standards for press performance. The nationalistic impulse behind citizens' criticism of Western media should—if directed inward—raise expectations for their own news organizations. To see how, we need first to understand the broader context of public communication.

Restrictions on press freedom ebb and flow, but they now take place against this backdrop of globalized connectivity. China has plugged into this communication network in several ways, most visibly when a window on the society was provided by the 2008 Beijing Olympics. According to Victor Cha, director of Asian Studies at Georgetown University, the Olympics created unprecedented social change in one of the world's most rigid systems, change that cannot easily be undone (Cha, 2008). Moves toward greater openness were met by increasing expectations of further liberalization. A similar ratcheting up of expectations has been occurring for some time with citizen expression online, where the vast Chinese social networks, online chat forums, and blogosphere have shown how space can be opened up for public deliberation. Western journalistic reports have often minimized Chinese blogs as a politically insignificant place to “blow off some steam,” incapable of yielding any actual social change, but that is giving them too little credit.

“Social responsibility” bloggers, for example, recognized for their contributions in nationwide contests, feature a number of posts and comments that would qualify in any Western definition of public deliberation. They include problem-solving and analytical discussion, with comments that dissent from the original posts. The blogs of celebrities far outnumber them in popularity and traffic, but even a significant percentage of those blogs contain comments and information that could be considered serious discussion about solving public problems (Dai & Reese, 2007). As the Chinese media have transformed and grown into vast competitive commercial enterprises, and as international media have become more available within China, journalistic performance itself has become one of these key problems for deliberation.

THE WATCHDOG IN THE GLOBAL NEWS ARENA

As “doing” journalism has become more universally possible, “being” a journalist has become a more difficult boundary to define. Nevertheless, it is still useful to retain some distinctions between citizen and professional, if only to see how they interact with each other in a larger structure of public accountability. Professional media signal a claim to institutional authority and economic resources rooted in their organizations, while citizen journalists are not typically commercially viable

and do not require adherence to a professional code in order to participate, just the desire to express an idea or support a cause. This distinction is meaningful because in this chapter we focus specifically on how citizen journalism operates to critique professional journalism, and how doing so may steer the discursive space toward more clearly articulated values and greater transparency. In what Reese (2008) characterizes as the “global news arena,” a synchronized discursive space is made possible by communication networks, which conceptually encompass both citizen and professional efforts. Certainly, the blogosphere is constituted by both forms, each feeding on and complementing the other (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, and Jeong, 2007).

Media watchdogs across the political spectrum have been a fixture in the United States for many years and in other countries with advanced press systems, but less so where press bias and political alignments are taken more for granted. They have brought much greater skepticism and awareness of journalistic techniques to the public, but the difference now in the online environment lies in the ability of citizens to respond on a much larger scale across and within societies. People know how they are portrayed, and others know that they know (or soon will). As a constructed product, news has been deconstructed with great enthusiasm as online citizen critics have joined organized media watchdog groups in monitoring how their interests are portrayed. Not surprisingly, this style of media criticism has become globalized along with everything else, and other parts of the world are taking up the task from their own perspectives as part of this larger discourse. Media criticism becomes less an organizational activity and more of a practice embedded in the citizen journalism network.

Chinese media criticism operates with a different ideological dynamic depending on whether directed inward or outward. Western observers are more aware of the latter, of course, given that they are directly implicated, but the amount of inward-looking critique may be underestimated. Language differences restrict circulation outside the country, and national pride, particularly among the young and well-educated, makes many Chinese reluctant to criticize their own media to foreigners (Osno, 2008). But that does not mean a lively conversation on press performance is not taking place within the borders.

EXTERNAL PRESS CRITICISM

Traditional criticism of international news has dwelled on the weaknesses and blindspots of Anglo-American media with respect to other parts of the world. The hegemonic system of global “news flow” meant that the dominant Western media covered the world from the perspective of the West and to

the disadvantage of the rest, which were led to understand their own societies through the lens of the dominant powers. This unbalanced news flow model has been rendered less useful in a networked system of media and communication, which gives traditional global news organizations less gatekeeping authority. In the long-standing debate over the quality of international news, the Chinese now have invoked the principles of media analysis to forcibly critique the performance of the world press, particularly as the Olympics became a flashpoint of heightened awareness as to how the nation is portrayed (with what the Chinese have regarded as unfair emphasis on, for example, Tibetan protest and government restrictions on the Falun Gong). To the extent that expressions of nationalism suit its interests, the government has given free reign to criticism of Western media, with Chinese online critics attacking CNN with the kind of vigor typical in the past from viewers of its American rival, Fox News Network (e.g., Anti-CNN.com). Chinese media monitors are observing problems of skewed news coverage that echo long-standing criticisms elsewhere in the world of sensationalism, negative conflict-based stories, unbalanced news flow, and a “coups and earthquakes” mentality. These concerns, although familiar press tendencies in the academic research, are amplified when they intersect with a defensive nationalism.

The Tibet Riots and Anti-CNN.com

In March 2008, Tibetans engaged in a series of activities to protest the Chinese central government’s rule. The initial political demonstration eventually turned violent, with Tibetans attacking and looting non-Tibetans and burning their property. The reporting by the Western media was conducted without much historical context regarding the long-standing political conflict between the Chinese central government and Tibet over the issue of autonomy. Coverage, therefore, was perceived as depicting the Chinese government trampling human rights, overriding the desire of Tibetans to be independent of China—using deadly force if necessary. CNN, for example, published a photo on its website of a Chinese army garrison arriving in a Tibet town to crack down on the protests, and the accompanying news article emphasized the death toll among protestors. In fact, a group of Tibetan rioters attacking the army’s vehicle with stones had been cropped out from the original AFP/Getty Images photo. The misleading discrepancy was quickly located on the internet and highlighted by Chinese netizens, who objected to the way CNN depicted the Chinese authorities and not the rioters as the instigators of the disturbance. Thus, local media critics used one Western news organization’s work to compare to another’s in searching for examples of visual framing unfavorable to China.

In response to this distortion, 23-year-old student Jin Rao established Anti-CNN.com, calling up netizens to “collect, classify, and exhibit the evidence of misbehaviors of Western media, and to voice our own opinion” (Anti-CNN, 2008). The website soon received an enthusiastic response from Chinese, both at home and abroad, who have been participating in evidence collecting, sorting, translating, and technical support ever since.¹ The collective action eventually led to requests for formal responses from CNN and other Western media such as RTL news in Germany. Following the Tibet riot, Anti-CNN's effort to protest the portrayals by Western media kept growing. The site now claims about 500,000 visits per day, 60% of which are from China. Regarding it as “a war resisting the Western dominance of news discourse,” Anti-CNN's criticism now extends to other international media. Characterizing itself as a cyberwar headquarters, the site works to challenge media credibility whenever China becomes the subject. In this initiative, the criticism began with a presumption of anti-China media “misbehaviors” and left it to citizens to find examples that fit.

The Olympic Torch Relay

Critiques of Western media from Chinese netizens surged again one month later, in April 2008, when the world press reports of the global Olympic Torch processions in London, Paris, and San Francisco were deemed to be unduly supporting the Tibetan demonstrators while belittling the Chinese government. Chinese netizens blamed the Western media's prejudice against China for turning the Olympic Torch processions into controversial publicity stunts around the globe and tarnishing their pride in the long-awaited games. This outrage over perceived media bias became evident across countless websites, blogs, and bulletin boards. The BBC, a well-known and respected brand in China, provoked anger because of its emphasis on the “peaceful” pro-Tibet protests while ignoring the presence of thousands of pro-Chinese supporters in the London torch relay. CNN incurred similar criticism when covering the relay in San Francisco.

The Chinese objected to what they regarded as the demonizing of their nation and their fellow citizens. For example, in an article “unmasking” Chinese guardians of the Olympic Torch, *The Times* in Britain focused on their “paramilitary training,” “aggressive methods of safeguarding,” and identified their paramilitary colleagues back in China as the force responsible for restoring order following the Tibet riots—thus linking the two incidents. Interviewees in one article all presented negative viewpoints about the guardians, labeling them as “thugs” and “robotic” (McCartney & Ford, 2008). *The Guardian* described the guardians as “flame retardants,” while the *Daily Mail* labeled them as “horrible Chinese thugs.” Particularly objectionable to the Chinese, given the high-profile media role of the

speaker, was the remark by CNN commentator Jack Cafferty, who appeared on the program *Situation Room* about the same time to accuse the Chinese government of being “the same bunch of goons and thugs they have been for the past fifty years.”

The most remarkable action taken was the online petition against the Western media (especially CNN—inevitably, perhaps, given its claim as the “global news leader”), which reportedly accumulated tens of thousands of signatures and comments. Netizens demanded that Western media respond to their petition, stop publishing irresponsible comments, and apologize for biased news coverage of China. To support the petition, citizens trans-posted Jack Cafferty’s photos and uploaded the video and text of his objectionable comments. The video, titled “Jack Cafferty CNN insulted Chinese people by racism words,”² became a popular YouTube posting. Although Cafferty denied that he was prejudiced against China, the vigorous petition and crusade successfully invited public examination into and suspicion toward the Western media in general, beyond the objections raised by these specific incidents.

Also widely shared in blogs and chat rooms were videos made by average citizens that satirized CNN and other Western media. For example, a music video made by a web singer, “Don’t be too CNN,” achieved strong online popularity in webspace, causing the title to be adopted by netizens to mean “don’t ignore the truth.” The “human search engine,” a search system that encourages human participation in filtering information provided by online search engines, exhibited its enormous power when online communities mobilized to track down specific individuals and facts missing in media coverage. In the Paris relay, for example, a pro-Tibet protester attempted to grab the torch from Paralympics torchbearer Jing Jin, but this incident was not seen in most Western media. Angry netizens initiated an internet manhunt to locate the protester, in order to examine his background and to launch an attack on him. The “human search engine” took four days to find the person with detailed information, including name, home address, and association with the Tibet independent movement. Netizens arguably went too far in disclosing such personal information, but their collective efforts clearly provided information ignored by most Western media.

INTERNAL PRESS CRITICISM

The Olympics provided the most compelling vehicle for citizen critics of the international media, but other kinds of critiques have been growing within China. Setting aside the dimension of national pride, which helps guide outward-directed criticism, the inward-looking discourse points more directly to professional

journalistic principles, both individual and institutional. Three recent examples exemplify this tendency.

Wenchuan Earthquake

The Wenchuan earthquake, on May 12, 2008, in the Sichuan province of China, received wide international attention and sympathy, but particularly so within China where the government's response was carefully watched. Given the extent of victims and witnesses, the earthquake was not only newsworthy but also accessible for citizen coverage, using cameras, cell phones, and video cameras (see also Chapter 7, this volume). Personal experience with the event gave citizen journalists a special vantage point and perspective for their online press criticism. Most of the critiques focused on the sensitivity of professional media, especially journalists' sensitivity to their subjects. For example, when Luyu Chen, a well-known anchorperson at Phoenix TV, wore Chanel sunglasses and carried a parasol during a live report from the disaster scene, she incurred the anger of netizens who disdained her for being frivolous and insensitive to the victims.³ The same anger emerged online toward journalists when they forced busy rescuers and seriously injured or dying victims to be interviewed, when they took up seats in rescue helicopters, when they presented the tragedy of the earthquake with bloody and graphic pictures and descriptions, or when they shot flash photos of victims' faces without regard for the trauma the bright lights would inflict on those who had spent so much time trapped under the ruins in darkness.

Beyond this simple insensitivity, the professional integrity of journalists also came in for attack. For example, CCTV (Chinese Central Television) correspondent Na Xu was referred to as a "runaway" and became the target of raging criticism when she admitted live on camera that she was not at the front line of a destroyed middle school at Dujingyan but in a hotel in Chengdu, a hundred miles away from the quake zone. Worse was her inaccurate comment while far from the scene that "the rescue at the school is almost over." At that time, to the contrary, the rescue had just started, with hundreds of students still in the ruins and their parents nearby, anxiously waiting for rescue news. The text and video of this live connection were posted on major news websites and forums, and Xu's performance was furiously condemned as neglect of journalistic duty.

This criticism of personal integrity eventually broadened to target the media organization itself when Shi Feike, Xu's former colleague at CCTV and now a well-known netizen and blogger, defended Xu against public criticism. In his blog post, trans-posted to many major online forums by netizens, Shi urged audiences to question CCTV's internal operation as well. He wrote that since the CCTV news channel rarely does live reporting on large-scale events like the earthquake,

journalists have insufficient experience dealing with live news coverage. CCTV's strict control on reporting scope also was deemed responsible for inadequacies in coverage. With constant warnings from their supervisors of what could be reported and what could not, Shi argued, journalists engaged in self-censorship, causing them to flinch from their professional duty (Feike, 2008).

Shi's blog post and the enthusiastic trans-posting created a space for the public to examine and discuss journalistic operation not only at the individual level, but also at the organizational and ownership level. Since CCTV is regarded as a propaganda machine for the Communist Party, any critiques toward its operation are ideologically and politically sensitive. Although not the first time, the challenge to CCTV by netizens who were able to link it to such a highly publicized national event signaled to the public the possibility of defying a media authority, particularly one that is regarded as both politically correct and professionally paradigmatic.

The South China Tiger

In October 2007, the Provincial Forestry Department of Shaanxi published photographs of a South China tiger as proof that the rare creature still existed in the wild. Although covered by various professional media including CCTV, the authenticity of these photos was soon questioned on Xitek.com, the biggest photographic website in China and an online platform for photographers to exchange ideas and opinions about equipment and techniques. In its picture forum, some photographers questioned the photo's lack of depth, making it appear like a flat "paper tiger." Before long, the photos aroused widespread suspicion among all major web forums organized and participated in by ordinary citizens, leading to demands that media professionals review the issue. Some newspapers even sent reporters to Shanxi to investigate the authenticity of the photos. Meanwhile, major gateway websites such as Sina.com (the leading news website), QQ.com (the leading internet community in China, based on its instant messenger services), and 163.com (the leading website based on online community building and online games), set up special sections to incorporate information and opinions from professional media, officials, experts, and citizens.

To locate the origin of the image in the photo, the "human search engine" again was employed. With numerous netizens involved, the original was found and posted in Xitek.com a month later, proving the South China tiger photos were fakes (Bobobo, 2007). Without the assembled expertise and intelligence of average citizens, scholars, and experts, major media reports would never have been challenged. In spite of pressure from tourism-minded local authorities, who sought to uphold the tiger's authenticity, citizen reporting was successful in urging

professional media to give their performance greater scrutiny and pursue the truth of questionable facts. Citizen journalism, as this example illustrates, can be an effective check on journalistic practice, with professional media sites even seeking to integrate these efforts into their own platforms.

San Lu Contaminated Formula Issue

In September 2008, lethal bacteria were found in San Lu baby formula manufactured in China. A baby died, and many were diagnosed with kidney stones, a health scare that traveled worldwide given the product's broad export. The problem was revealed when some company insiders disclosed that tainted product had existed for years but that media coverage was kept quiet as a result of San Lu's powerful public-relations manipulation. The social responsibility of the entire Chinese media was brought into question when the extent of their cooperation in promoting a corporate image was revealed. David Bandurski, a researcher in the China Media Project in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, noticed that two reporters, Wanfu Miao and Jingxue Jia, frequently appeared in the mainstream media with consistently positive news about San Lu (including *China Food Quality News*, the newspaper designated by China's State Council as the primary vehicle for disseminating food quality and supervision policies and regulations). These two "reporters," as Bandurski revealed, were San Lu's public-relations mangers:

The complicity of China's media is doubly disturbing because it underlines a dangerous trend resulting directly from the party's policy on media—an amplification of falsehood driven by the narrowest commercial ends attended by state news censorship that suppresses information that is critical to the well-being of ordinary Chinese. . . . [U]nless the media are given greater freedom to monitor officials and corporations on behalf of the people, the cruel and cynical contrast between public relations ploys and hidden realities will persist. (Bandurski, 2008)

Bandurski's article was originally published in English at the "China Media Project" webpage but soon was translated into Chinese and trans-posted onto websites with heavier traffic. Because many feared it might be screened by the Chinese internet "Great Firewall" because of the politically sensitive words (i.e., criticism of the Communist party's policy on media), they quickly trans-posted it to their blogs and to chat forums so as to save copies of the article, or at least prolong the deletion of it (even if blog posts would be deleted). In this case, the threat of censorship ironically caused an even quicker online viral distribution.

The impact of such criticism on the Chinese media is still unclear, but certainly closer attention is now being paid to professional practices, including those of the online portals themselves. After the San Lu issue was disclosed, an "internal

document” appeared online disclosing that the company was trying to invest 3 million RMB (Chinese yuan) in Baidu, the biggest search engine in China, to help screen negative news. This document aroused immense surprise and indignation among citizens, who demanded that Baidu respond. Eventually, Baidu claimed that it had denied the invitation of cooperation and promised to provide objective, timely, and comprehensive information about the issue to the public.

CONCLUSION

Taken globally, these developments in China point to new ways of understanding social change. Previously, theories of political economy and cross-national news flow emphasized the effect of one power bloc on another, or the imposition of one system on another, in a process of “McDonaldization.” In the “world culture” perspective on globalization, however, beliefs emerge, not as the result of imposition and force, but out of spaces of mutual awareness in which standards evolve in a reflexive process (Robertson, 1995). That dynamic lies not always in the obvious government controls on citizen and journalistic expression but in the implicit spaces that emerge with their own pressures toward social change. Rather than declaring one country authoritarian and another free, as Westerners are prone to do, it is more helpful to examine—as we have done—these spaces for public deliberation created by fluid networks of expression that do not always track national boundaries or traditional distinctions between the political and non-political.

One of the most important consequences of citizen journalism is the structure of accountability it provides for traditional, “professional” media. Nothing stimulates the deliberative space like a perceived failing of the press, particularly in this case when it is a failing of the foreign press regarding China. We continue to be intrigued with the prospects of this deliberative criticism for democracy. Although operating within an authoritarian framework, Chinese netizens are expressing their opinions, disagreeing with others, making their choices among options—all behaviors that constitute the world of democracy. In a *New York Times* report, “Google’s China Problem,” Clive Thompson (2006) argued that internet communication is bringing a revolution to China, not with dramatic changes in ruling party or governance, but with a revolution experienced “mostly as one of self-actualization: empowerment in a thousand tiny, everyday ways.”

In examining public deliberation in China, we find this idea provocative, suggesting the deliberative features of the blogosphere help to promote a “democratic rehearsal” process (see also Dai & Reese, 2007). If the kind of citizen media criticism we have reviewed here has a similar effect in the Chinese context as it has elsewhere, we should ask what that will mean for the quality of press performance.

As perhaps China's post-Olympics concern for its world media image wanes, we can imagine that enthusiasm for media critique and concerns for press bias being refocused internally, raising the same expectations for home-grown press performance with a continuing nudge toward transparency.

NOTES

1. Examples of distorted photos available at: <http://www.anti-cnn.com/index2.html>
2. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2j2bvOq3fLA>
3. Tianya chat forum about the performance of Chen, available at <http://laiba.tianya.cn/laiba/CommMsgs?cmm=281&tid=2600915412149663923>

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