



## The future of journalism in emerging deliberative space

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The future of journalism will continue unfolding within the ongoing process of globalization, which brings particularly important pressures toward transparency. Within this context, journalism now confronts multiple global audiences with the capacity to find alternative media, compare news accounts with their own experience, and challenge mainstream reports. Through a larger structure of online platforms and networks, 'professional' journalism has been placed in dialog with citizens with their own forms of journalism and in juxtaposition to alternative accounts readily available across national borders. Within these networks are embedded the deliberative spaces of democratic life.

Among the important sites where this process is playing out is China, where in spite of remarkable strides in economic and social development the likelihood of greater transparency has been brought into question. This is the kind of timely example that suggests to me our need for better concepts and research to understand these changes. Neither authoritarian nor free, in the western dualism, it is more helpful to recast journalism within the spaces opening up at different moments and places, spaces for public deliberation created by fluid networks of expression that don't always track national boundaries or traditional distinctions between the political and non-political.

In the case study provided by China, the most visible manifestation of this phenomenon was provided by the 2008 Olympics and the influx of some 20,000 journalists, whose very presence created an unprecedented pressure for a more expansive journalistic space. According to Victor Cha, Director of Asian Studies at Georgetown University, the Olympics created social change in one of the world's most rigid systems, change that cannot easily be undone (Cha, 2008). 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 opened new space for public deliberation. Although western reports have often seen blogs as

a politically insignificant place to 'blow off some steam' and incapable of yielding any actual social change, that is giving them too little credit.

'Social responsibility' bloggers, for example, recognized for their contributions in nationwide contests, include posts and comments that would qualify in any western definition of public deliberation. They feature 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 sites contain comments and information that could be considered serious discussion about solving public problems (Dai and Reese, 2007).

Within this expanded space for citizen commentary has emerged a particularly significant form of media criticism. Chinese netizens have begun to forcibly critique the performance of the world press, particularly as the Olympics became a flashpoint of heightened awareness of national image. Online critics attacked CNN with the kind of vigor typical in the past from viewers of its American rival, Fox News Network (e.g. [www.anti-CNN.com](http://www.anti-CNN.com)). In the long-standing debate over the quality of international news, media criticism has gone viral – with new potential consequences.

Traditional criticism of international news has dwelled on the weaknesses and blindspots of Anglo-American media with respect to other parts of the world, a perspective seconded by the subjects of that reporting. The 'coups and earthquakes' paradigm characterized the difficulty western (primarily US) media have in providing broader context for foreign events beyond the stereotypical violent social transitions and natural disasters, thrusting certain countries onto the map before receding again into media obscurity. 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. But this unbalanced news flow model has been rendered less useful in a networked system of media and communication, which gives traditional global gatekeepers less authority and where any news organizations can be a target of criticism. The Chinese observe problems of skewed news coverage that echo long-standing criticisms elsewhere in the world (Reese and Dai, in press). The difference now, however, lies in the ability of targets of that coverage to respond on a much larger scale across and within societies. People know how they are portrayed, and others know that they know.

Taken globally, these developments in China point to new ways of understanding social change, unlike the theories of political economy and cross-national news flow that overemphasize the effect of one power bloc

over another, the 'McDonaldization' of one system imposed on another. Understanding the new journalism will benefit from a 'world culture' perspective of globalization thinkers like Robertson, in which changes emerge, not as the results of imposition and force, but out of spaces of mutual awareness in which standards evolve in a reflexive process (Robertson, 1995).

Perhaps in the Chinese case, for example, it's not difficult to imagine the same enthusiasm for media critique and concerns for press bias being focused internally. Raising the same expectations for home-grown press performance would help give a continuing nudge toward transparency. We need to understand better how this phenomenon may be happening in other parts of the world – reconstituting spaces for public deliberation in unexpected areas and in ways difficult to predict and control.

## References

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