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The interaction between mass media and the internet in non-democratic states: The case of China

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Abstract
The internet is widely seen to have facilitated social movement organizations (SMOs) by providing them with alternative media. In the western context, some authors suggest that additionally SMOs use the internet tactically as a tool to gain access to traditional news media. This usage is seen to reaffirm and reinforce the centrality of print and electronic news media. This article shifts the focus to China and examines the interaction between the internet and the traditional mass media in the unfolding of three internet incidents. It reveals that via the expression of public opinion on the internet ordinary people are able to collectively shape and even direct conventional news agendas. In China, where the role of the media is to 'direct' public opinion rather than to reflect it, this suggests that the interaction between the two forms of communication serves to challenge state control over the traditional media.

Keywords
internet control, internet incident, news agenda, online activism, public opinion, social movement

In a variety of ways, the internet has facilitated the growth and strength of social movements (Castells, 2007). One way it has achieved this is to provide access to alternative media (Atton, 2002). The internet serves to some extent to place the apparatus of cultural production in the hands of ordinary people. Traditionally, access to such forms of production has been restricted to specialists and has largely been controlled by social elites (Tabbi,

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1997). The internet allows much wider participation and access, however, and allows social movement organizations (SMOs), in particular, to better represent their positions via the creation of their own media products. In this manner, they may be better placed to resist and challenge negative depictions of themselves and their interests (Chesters and Welsh, 2005; Garrett, 2006). In the 21st century it is commonplace, for example, for SMOs to develop and maintain their own websites which help them to disseminate information to global audiences (Rosenkrands, 2004; van Aelst and Walgrave, 2004).

While the internet allows social movements to bypass gatekeepers of the traditional media and thereby to counter biased reporting within it (Garrett, 2006), in order to achieve maximum impact it nevertheless remains important for SMOs to promote their ideas via the mainstream news media (Lester and Hutchins, 2009). This is because, notwithstanding the importance of the internet, the traditional news media remain dominant in terms of access to mass publics (Cardoso and Neto, 2004). In this context, according to Bennett (2004: 141), SMO websites 'are more than just parallel information universes that exist independently of the traditional mass media'; they also feed information into the latter. Increasingly such efforts to influence the mainstream media are successful as the internet becomes more and more widely used as a resource, not just in terms of reporting the news but also in making the news. In developing story lines journalists frequently check websites for information and from time to time they also pick up on stories which have emerged on a variety of web pages (Bennett, 2004; Castells, 2007; Chester and Welsh, 2005). In attempting to influence the emergence and development of traditional news stories, Lester and Hutchins (2009) suggest that SMOs adopt a (traditional) media-centric approach and use the internet simply as a tool to gain access to the traditional news media. This leads them to argue that the interplay between new media and the traditional media serves to reaffirm and reinforce 'the historical and cultural dominance of print and electronic news media' rather than challenging and subverting the power relations represented within them (2009: 580).

However, the literature discussed hitherto has largely focused upon SMOs in 'western' contexts, such as the USA, Australia and western European countries. The term 'western' self-evidently encapsulates states which are demonstrably heterogeneous. For example, in this context, 'western' countries have different political structures which present different political opportunities for social movements (Kriesi et al., 1992). Despite the differences, however, they can nevertheless be conceived of as broadly democratic states. In contrast, this article shifts the focus to China, a non-democratic setting. There has been an explosion of research interest in internet use in China. However, the primary focus in previous research has been on the internet itself in terms of either internet control or its empowerment potential. In contrast, this article discusses the interaction between the internet and traditional media, which has hitherto been under-considered. This unique focus adds a new dimension to discussions of both internet use in China and the interaction between the two types of media.

Within China the internet has grown in popularity and accessibility such that by the end of 2009 the internet user population had reached an estimated 384 million (CNNIC, 2009). For convenience, these users can be termed 'netizens' – citizens utilizing the 'net'. With the growth in the netizen population, 'internet incidents' (i.e. collective activity spontaneously developed amongst netizens) have come to be seen as increasingly

influential by some observers (Hilgers, 2009; Zhu et al., 2009). The rise of public discussion on the internet, which could be regarded as dissent within the Chinese context, is particularly significant in the context of a ban on spontaneous and unauthorized public demonstration in China. In this setting, the internet provides people with an alternative channel via which they can relatively safely express opinions and articulate problems (Lagerkvist, 2005; Yang, 2003a).

This article describes and discusses three 'internet incidents' which took place in China in 2009. In the course of these 'incidents', netizens used the internet both to promote their opinions and to comment on the subsequent mainstream news media reporting which emerged. Across the three examples there is evidence of an influence from netizens in what are traditionally publicly inaccessible forms of state-controlled mass media.

The mass media in China

The media are powerful because they are the major sources of information about the world for most people (Talbot, 2007). As such, they 'occupy a contested space in which powerful groups vie for legitimacy' (Quinn, 2007: 18). In China, the conventional media are owned and run by the government, and they are seen as the mouthpiece of the Party. Prior to the economic reform in the early 1980s, they were Party propaganda apparatus, disseminating state policies, decisions and actions to the general public (Rawnsley, 2006; Shen et al., 2009). However, economic reform has brought about media marketization and, as a result, considerations of commercial interest have begun to influence the newsmakers of the land (Wang, 2009; Zhao, 1998). This has led the conventional media to become concerned with audience appeal and, to a certain extent, has helped to liberate media from their role as Party propaganda tools. Nevertheless, control and censorship remain tight; the media are required to follow the Party line and remain charged with the proper direction of public opinion (Rawnsley, 2006; Tong, 2009; Tong and Sparks, 2009). Especially at times of crisis, according to Zhang (2006), the paramount task of the conventional media remains the avoidance of a loss of confidence in the regime and the safeguarding of political stability. Thus, according to de Burgh: 'What the state is doing is maintaining control over major political issues, keeping ownership under its thumb, issuing codes of conduct, and holding censorship meetings while releasing – or subjecting – media operations to market risks and rewards' (2003: 802).

To be sure, the boundary lines between what it is permitted to report and what it is not permitted to report are always ambiguous. For this reason, Yu comments: 'In China, journalism is a risky and calculated business that involves constant line pushing and pulling strategies.… Chinese journalists have to take situated actions and tactics based on opportunistic calculations and specificities' (2006: 318). Tong (2007) identified a number of 'guerrilla reporting tactics' journalists used to circumvent 'mine fields', including not touching the 'key point' when reporting sensitive issues, making comments in the form of constructive suggestions instead of political criticism, and covertly weaving viewpoints into the presentation of fact. Another tactic, according to Tong and Sparks (2009), is tapping into public opinions as expressed on the internet and investigating the stories behind such views. After all, public opinions can help to protect journalists/individuals from political danger (de Burgh, 2003).

Internet control and resistance to it

Given that the conventional media are controlled by the Party, the internet provides ordinary Chinese people with an alternative channel to voice their concerns (Yang, 2003a). This is not to say that the internet is uncontrolled. In fact, China has established resilient and effective internet controls (Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Li, 2010; Tsui, 2003; Walton, 2001) and, according to the Open Net Initiative (2009), it has one of the most sophisticated filtering systems in the world. However, internet control is potentially easier to subvert than control of the conventional mass media in states which exercise censorship on a wide scale. This is because communication through conventional media is unidirectional, allowing only a few key individuals 'to speak', which facilitates control. The internet differs in that it enables multidirectional communication. The decentralized nature of the internet has the potential to allow netizens to stage resistance in a 'safer' environment. For example, Yang (2003a, 2003b) has observed that netizens utilize a variety of strategies to circumvent censorship. First, when filters have been imposed on sites to prevent netizens from making postings containing sensitive terms, netizens use *pin-yin* (the system for writing Chinese in the Roman alphabet) or insert punctuation between Chinese characters to bypass censors (for example, if 'communist' is one of the sensitive terms, netizens can write 'com.munist'). Second, netizens can protest if moderators delete their postings. Since websites need active contributors, moderators have to exercise some degree of restraint. Third, if one website is too strict, netizens can choose to leave it and join less strict ones, exerting a certain pressure for the exercise of 'latitude'.

Such counter-control strategies enable people to discuss social and political issues. Thus, discussion of politics and criticism of the government is relatively common on the internet (Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011; Tang and Yang, 2011; Zhou, 2009). The idea of 'safety in numbers' is also relevant here (Yang, 2009a), as the size of the netizen population makes it difficult to monitor everybody. As such, the internet is seen as a 'public sphere' facilitating debate and the articulation of problems (Lagerkvist, 2005; Yang, 2003a). Taking into consideration both existing controls and current forms of resistance, researchers have tended to agree that the internet helps to foster civil society in China, even though it might not necessarily bring about democratic revolution (MacKinnon, 2008; Shen et al., 2009; Yang, 2003a).

The internet and conventional media are converging as conventional media organizations create their own websites and also collect information from the internet (Castells, 2007). This may result in some of the boundaries between the conventional media and 'new media' becoming opaque. In the context of this article, the boundaries we consider are between an internet-based media allowing ordinary people a voice and a conventional media which remains primarily controlled by the authorities and which is dominated by professional journalists. We focus specifically on the ordinary people's use of the internet and the ways in which journalists are influenced by such internet content in developing and reporting their stories.

The research

In considering the potential interaction between internet postings and the mass media in the Chinese context, it is necessary to take account of the ways in which the context of a

society like China differs from many democratic states. Yang (2009b) notes that in many western societies SMOs use the internet to organize social protests which also take place offline. By contrast, Chinese online activism is unlikely to be driven by offline organizations and instead is generally initiated by netizens on Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) websites. It involves expressing strong opinions on the internet, which may encourage others to make further contributions which ultimately amount to a form of public protest. In order to understand the impact of such protest it is helpful to attempt to trace particular 'internet incidents' both on line and in relation to the broader mass media.

The *2009 Report on the Analysis of Public Opinions on the Internet* (Zhu et al., 2009) listed the top 20 internet incidents in 2009 that provoked strongest public opinions. This article strategically discusses three of these incidents because they represent three types of interaction between the two kinds of media. The first case is the Entrapment Incident, in which netizens influenced the agenda of the conventional media. The second is the Deng Yujao Incident, in which netizens helped to sustain the news agenda by making online postings and comments. The Google Incident is the third chosen case in which netizens challenged the media agenda. These three cases contained richer information and involved longer interactive processes than others, and in this sense they are atypical. Flyvbjerg (2006: 229) points out that information-rich cases 'activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied'. Alternative cases were rejected because of their shorter duration, as a result of which they revealed fewer underlying mechanisms. Thus the length of the 'data stream' was a critical consideration in the choice of the cases.

To gain a detailed understanding of the interaction, one of the authors started with relevant news reports on sina.com. Sina.com is a giant web portal and claims to be the best online news centre in China. Being a web portal, it collects and categorizes news from various news media, which enables it to offer comprehensive coverage of news events. Sina.com set up dedicated web pages to cover its collected news reports and comments related to the Entrapment Incident and the Deng Yujiao Incident. It also collected and reproduced news reports relating to the Google Incident, though in this case a dedicated webpage was not created. Besides sina.com, there were also other overview sites which were trawled, notably three online encyclopaedias – Wikipedia, Baidu-pedia and Interactive-pedia (the last two are Chinese and based on the Wikipedia model), which offered detailed accounts of the incidents. Sina news indicated the sources from where it collected the reports and online encyclopaedias provided relevant references. This helped in tracing original news reports and comments and relevant web posts/logs. Furthermore, three major Chinese BBS websites were searched – Tianya, MOP and Kaidi – for related posts. The searches took place in the early months of 2010. Unravelling the selected 'stories' was an effective way to establish a chronology in the reporting and to consider the direct references made by netizens to the mass media and by journalists to internet and netizen activity.

Setting the news agenda: the Entrapment Incident

On 8 September 2009 in Minhang District, Shanghai, a man approached Zhang Jun, who was driving his car and had stopped at a red traffic light. The man asked for a lift. Initially

Zhang Jun refused the request but the man pressed him, saying that he had a stomach ache and could not get a taxi. On hearing this Zhang relented and agreed to give him a lift. On the way, Zhang was offered a small fee as a token of the man's apparent gratitude. He declined the gift. However, when they arrived at their destination the passenger pulled Zhang Jun's car key from the car ignition and a group of traffic policemen suddenly surrounded the car. The police accused Zhang of providing an illegal cab service and took possession of his car until such time as he paid a fine. Zhang later made a complaint to the Traffic Police Department (TPD), but they were unsympathetic asking, 'Did that man's stomach ache have anything to do with you?' The police insisted on the payment for the repossession of the car and Zhang was left outraged and angry. As a result he posted his account of the experience on both Xcar BBS and Tianya BBS on 10 and 11 September respectively. Han Han, a famous author and blogger who is renowned for satirical essays, noted Zhang's post and pasted it onto his blog on 11 September. As the most popular blogger in China, Han has numerous fans who ardently read, comment on and cross-post his blog essays. Consequently Zhang's posting received widespread attention and his description led netizens to express the view that he had been unjustly entrapped by the police as part of a corrupt revenue-raising scam.

In line with the observation that the internet has become an important source for investigative reports for some newspapers (Tong and Sparks, 2009), journalists at the *Oriental Morning Post*, a Shanghai-based newspaper, soon picked up on the internet traffic. Following this lead, they interviewed both Zhang and the traffic police and the story made headline news on 15 September. The headline selected by the journalists roughly translates as: 'A white-collar citizen who provided a lift with good intentions was entrapped: police insist that as long as a fee was offered this is treated as an illegal cab operation'.

It is posited that if an issue provokes widespread public outcry on the internet, journalists are more likely to take the risk of offending the powerful by reporting it in mainstream press (de Burgh, 2003). Public opinion is thought to provide some protection for journalists who can legitimately defend their coverage as 'neutral' (Tong and Sparks, 2009). Thus, it is perhaps no surprise that the *Oriental Morning Post* began their report with the words: 'Han Han's blog on 11 September has attracted particular attention …' On 16 September the coverage spread to the television networks, as Shanghai TV broadcast an interview with the police involved in the case. The police insisted that their actions were based on evidence, but they were unable or unwilling to supply this resulting in a further escalation of public interest. The same day, Han Han wrote a blog with the title: 'This country is anticipating National Day; this city is anticipating the International Expo'. The blog continued:

> In this society, if you are sick or have emergencies and need a lift, it is hard to get a driver willing to give you one. Willing drivers are rare; they are good natured. What Minhang TPD did was simply to sort out the good natured people from the crowd, detaining their cars, and imposing a fine …[1]

The media reports fed back to netizens. Together with Han's blog, they were cross-posted onto major BBSs, which sparked another round of comment and discussion. The Annual

Report of Minhang TPD was also publicized. This stated that in the previous two years the penalties that the organization had imposed on illegal vehicle operations had raised 50 million RMB, which exceeded revenue targets. Netizens began to express the opinion that Minhang TPD was making money by entrapping innocent, well-meaning, citizens, and they came together in condemnation of what they saw as the breaking of some of the moral foundations of society.

It is noted that in China people increasingly attempt to make use of the internet to defend their rights. This is particularly the case when the latter are seen to be eroded by government officials – those supposed to be the servants of the people rather than their exploiters. In this situation there are precedents where complaints have been published on BBS websites in the hope of attracting public attention (Benney, 2007; Feng, 2009) and perhaps with the intention of appealing to party officials themselves. Such intentions were also displayed by Zhang Jun, who started his posting with the words, 'Dear leaders who may read this posting …' Clearly, he hoped that his submission would receive attention on the internet, which would in turn make it an issue of concern for administrative agencies. His strategy was partly successful. Thanks to Han Han, the posting received widespread attention on the internet. This made it an important story for news media which investigated and communicated the issue to a wider population. However, the strong public opinion aroused did not on this occasion stimulate state intervention. Nevertheless, in pursuit of justice, Zhang filed a lawsuit against the TPD. In the light of further developments, the incident faded from public interest towards the end of the September.

However, this was not the end of the story as public fury at entrapment generally was re-ignited on 16 October, when Dragon TV reported Sun Zhongjie's case. Sun had experienced a similar fate to Zhang Jun in the Pudong district of Shanghai, on 14 October. Sun had only arrived in Shanghai two days earlier and, as a consequence, was in a strong position to arouse public concern. He achieved this on another front altogether however. Faced with the entrapment and fine Sun took extreme action – he was so angry that he chopped off one of his fingers as a demonstration of his innocence. This action led to an explosion of public anger on the internet. On Baidu BBS one netizen opened an 'Entrapment Post Bar' dedicated to discussion of the issue. Within ten days, discussion threads in this bar alone topped 400. At the same time, journalists began to reinvestigate, and relevant news and comments flooded the TV and newspapers. Faced with this level of renewed public interest, the Shanghai authority could no longer ignore the issue and ordered the Urban Management Bureau to investigate Sun's case. Perhaps predictably, the investigation concluded (on 20 October) that the case did not involve entrapment. However, this caused consternation in public arenas of debate and another round of investigation by the police was ordered. On 26 October the police finally acknowledged that they 'used bait' in Sun's case and apologized to him.

As Zhang and Sun's cases reveal, complaints against the authorities in China are hard to uphold. Nevertheless, following the success of Sun and the media frenzy that had surrounded his case Zhang won his case on 19 November. This victory followed the failure of six previous cases where drivers with similar experience had filed lawsuits against the traffic police in Shanghai. It seems reasonable to suggest that the success of the case of Zhang related in some way to the media attention that both his and Sun's case had attracted.

Sustaining the news agenda: the Deng Yujiao Incident

Netizens not only discuss their social and political grievances on the internet, but also comment more generally on news reports emanating from conventional media and web portals. Furthermore, they cross-post reports onto various BBS forums for further discussion. This form of communication is very like the kinds of verbal communication that traditionally surround the broadcast of news. However, a key difference in relation to such internet 'chatter' is that netizens leave a text record (a trail) which remains for all to read until actively deleted. As such, online discussion has the potential to arouse strong public opinion. This may feed back to the conventional media as a strong collective voice rather than the views and gripes of isolated individuals. This increases the potential impact of public discussion of news agendas. Thus, the internet may well provide netizens with more effective feedback mechanisms than have traditionally been allowed via conventional media. It is this aspect of the development of netizen activity which the Deng Yujiao incident illustrates most clearly.

The incident started as a homicide case reported in *The Changjiang Times* on 12 May 2009. The homicide took place on the evening of 10 May 2009, when three government officials of Yesanguan, Badong County, clashed with a waitress as they asked for service in a local leisure centre. The waitress stabbed one of the officials to death and injured another. The waitress – Deng Yujiao then called the police and was arrested and charged with manslaughter. Towards the end of the report a possible motive for the murder was mentioned. It seemed that one of the officials demanded that the waitress provide 'special service' to him – a euphemism for sex. The waitress was reported to have refused this demand whereupon the official took out a bundle of currency notes and used them to slap the waitress. The case was also reported by three other local newspapers and reproduced online by portal websites.

The initial report appeared as a presentation of 'facts' announced by the local police. This is perhaps unsurprising, as it is common practice that, when reporting controversial news, journalists exert self-censorship and refrain from direct criticism of authorities in order to avoid political risks and pass editorial censorship (Lagerkvist, 2008; Tong, 2007, 2009). However, words such as 'government officials', 'special service', 'a bundle of currency notes slapping the waitress', attracted attention immediately. Netizens were quick to express their views on the case through the comment function of news websites. A few netizens cross-posted the reports onto BBS websites to attract more attention. The expressed opinion was almost universally one-sided and the comment – 'The official's death is well deserved. We strongly request the release of the heroine who got rid of an evil for the people' – was widely supported.

Since strong public opinion serves to legitimize the media's interest in sensitive issues (de Burgh, 2003; Tong and Sparks, 2009), netizens' responses unsurprisingly drew further media attention, and a few newspapers, drawing upon netizens' reactions, started to comment on the case in a critical tone. For example, one commented: 'The strong public opinion in favour of the waitress covered up the key message in it: dignity and life.… Life perhaps is more important than dignity, but why [do] netizens show sympathy not to the dead but to the waitress?' On 13 May more details of the case were released by the police and reported by news agencies. The following is a summary of the information which was revealed:

> After a dinner including alcoholic drinks, Deng Dagui, Huang and another official went to the leisure centre. Huang went in first and saw the waitress – Deng Yujiao washing clothes in the staff room. He asked her if she provided 'special service'. She replied that she was a Karaoke waitress and did not provide 'special service'. Huang was angry at the reply: This is a place for service. What are you doing here if you do not 'serve'? The two argued. When Deng Yujiao started to leave the room, Deng Dagui interrupted: 'Are you afraid that we do not have money?' He took out a bundle of currency notes which he showed her. She ignored him and tried to leave the room again. Deng Dagui pushed her onto the couch. She stood up and was pushed onto the couch again. It was then that she took out a knife and stabbed Deng Dagui three times. Huang was also stabbed when he tried to stop her.

Netizens were again quick to add comments to the 'matter-of-fact' report and to cross-post these onto online forums for discussion. The strongly held opinion was that this was not a case of manslaughter, but one of attempted rape – the officials abused their powers in trying to force Deng Yujiao to provide sex. On BBS websites, various literary forms – such as poetry, lyric and slogan – were used to describe her as a heroine who had displayed the courage to confront and defeat the powerful. Netizens felt triumphant at Deng Dagui's death and angry at the charge of manslaughter brought by the police. They feared that Deng Yujiao might become a victim of a corrupt legal system. As a result, netizens called for justice and action to rescue her.

In an interesting development, on 14 May Wu Gan, a netizen, decided that Deng Yujiao needed more than supportive comments and 'went offline' to offer legal support. He made a posting on Kaidi BBS which called for offline action and he revealed his real identity. Furthermore, he asked for financial donations to allow him to travel to Badong to help Deng Yujiao. He then went to Badong to see Den Yujiao's family members, who accepted the legal services of the Beijing lawyers proposed by Wu Gan. In the meantime Wu Gan continued to report events as they unfolded on his blog.

At its inception the case appeared to be just an ordinary manslaughter, which would be likely to proceed through normal legal processes quietly, as a report in the *Guardian* newspaper suggested: 'Without the overwhelming attention and pressure from internet users, this would be no more than a common criminal case' (Wei, 2009). Following the initial coverage, it could have been expected that the news media would shift their focus to other issues. However, netizens' activity sent a strong signal to the news media that the case was going to be an ongoing, and newsworthy, focus of public attention and debate. Wines (2009) pointed out: 'Spurred by the internet frenzy, Chinese journalists had converged on Badong County.' Journalists were at the forefront of investigating the case and searching for relevant information, witnesses or evidence, while the majority of netizens scrutinized, questioned and discussed every report in detail. As such, the activity of the conventional media and the interaction with online discussion and comment provided mutual feedback and momentum, which served to ratchet up interest in the case. Certainly netizens' actions and opinions were also the focus of newspaper analysis and commentaries. The titles of newspaper commentaries, such as 'Reading social crisis from public opinions on the Deng Yujiao case', 'The Deng Yujiao case opens the era when everybody is a judge' and 'Public opinions and justice should be separated', clearly indicated the influence of netizens on media agendas.

The continuing media coverage and intense public opinion aroused concern amongst the authorities who began to feel that the situation was out of control – various online petitions were being launched and netizens were organizing trips to Badong. Fearing that political stability would be endangered, the Beijing censors took action.[2] On 22 May the State Council Information Office ordered media and web portals to de-emphasize news reports on Deng Yujiao by diluting them with other news. Web portals were also instructed to use only official government statements and not to comment on the case. On 26 May, all journalists received the order to withdraw from Badong and to stop reporting on Deng Yujiao. At the same time, public transport to Badong was cut off and local hotels were ordered not to take in guests. On 31 May, according to the state news agency – Xinhua News Agency – the police finished their investigation of the case and transferred it to the court; the two surviving officials were disciplined. On 16 July, the Badong court announced their verdict – Deng Yujiao was found guilty of excessive self-defence, but was not given any sentence due to her presumed 'mental state'.

From beginning to end, the story had been the focus of media attention for more than a month. Without the netizens' action this focus would not have been sustained. Altogether, the internet was flooded with more than 4 million postings about the incident (Hilgers, 2009; Wines, 2009). It was this kind of intense opinion that sustained the media agenda and made the story headline news not only in local but also national media for a prolonged period of time.

In the process, the role that the conventional media played was also under netizen scrutiny. Any report that seemed to put Deng Yujiao at a disadvantage was questioned and condemned. For example, a report, which described Deng Guida as a 'relatively competent' official and Deng Yujiao as a 'bad-tempered girl', was widely criticized. In netizens' view, such reports served the government hidden agenda to undermine and influence public opinion, and were thus 'anti-public'. As such, netizens expressed opinions not only on the stories but also on the activities and appropriateness of the conventional media itself. This is most vividly illustrated by the third incident to be considered here: the 'Google Incident'.

Defeating the news agenda: the Google Incident

On 18 June 2009, the China Central Television Station (CCTV) used three prime-time programmes to bombard Google with criticisms. The main thrust of these was that the search engine directed its users to obscene materials. In the *Topics in Focus* programme, Gao Ye, a university student, was interviewed. He said that Google poisoned one of his classmates and made him restless by directing him to pornographic websites.

CCTV's criticism created controversy. CCTV is the most prominent TV station in China with the largest audience. This gives it immense influence. Paradoxically, according to Zhang (2006), CCTV is more closely censored than other channels and has to carefully follow the agenda set by the authorities. At the time of the Google incident, the authorities were trying to introduce a new regulation requiring the mandatory installation of filtering software (the 'Green Dam') on every new computer sold in China. The proposed regulation was not welcomed and sparked wide criticism. Many netizens felt that, in line with the desire of the authorities, CCTV was trying to

divert public criticism away from the regulation and was paving the way for its enforcement. At the same time, netizens were cynical about Gao Ye's words. They searched for his name on Xiaonei Net (a Chinese website based on the Facebook model) and found him with his photographs. From the information he provided on the website, netizens noticed that he was actually an intern for the CCTV programme *Topics in Focus*. They posted this information on Tianya and Mop, two of the most popular BBS websites in China. The news spread rapidly and CCTV was accused of cheating in its reporting by interviewing its own staff.

The information provoked widespread criticism of CCTV but netizens also directed their anger towards Gao Ye and flooded his personal space on Xiaonei Net with mocking and inflammatory comments. His word 'restless' was widely quoted and became an internet catchword in 2009. Furthermore, some netizens launched the 'human flesh search engine' at him. 'Human flesh search' is a unique internet phenomenon in China. It involves a large number of netizens collaborating in searching both online and offline sources, with the objective of exposing, all traceable (personal) information about a target person. Such searches are commonly initiated on BBS when a target person has provoked public indignation. People conducting the research are commonly referred to as 'Human Flesh Search Engines'. Due to the mass collaboration entailed, such searches are generally both effective and ruthless in exposing detailed private information about a person. While this has legal implications (Cheung, 2009), use of the human-flesh search engine is a powerful weapon for netizens in the conduct of internet campaigns. Through this particular search, Gao Ye's personal information, including his mobile number, his photographs and his blog, were found and posted on the internet. Unfortunately, his girlfriend also became a victim and her personal information was exposed online as well. Overwhelmed by mocking attacks, Gao Ye and his girlfriend took steps to delete all their identification on the internet.

By scrutinizing the evidence that CCTV had used, netizens defeated its agenda. Journalists of the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, one of the most outspoken newspapers in China (Tong and Sparks, 2009), noticed netizens' action. Having sought confirmation from CCTV that Gao Ye was an intern working on *Topics in Focus*, the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* reported the story on 20 June with the title: '*Topics in Focus* fabricating evidence?' In the next two days, this case was reported and commented on in newspapers and on websites with sensational titles, such as 'Being made a laughing stock CCTV is "restless"', 'Blocking Google made CCTV "restless"', and '"Restless" swept the internet'. Thus the news agenda was shifted and the focus of interest became how netizens defeated CCTV.

The implications of internet events

The internet provides an effective channel for netizens to articulate their views (Yang, 2003a) and to read news reports. More importantly, the internet can provide a forum where a large number of netizens can collectively discuss issues of public concern. Additionally, they can comment directly on issues on websites, or cross-post to other websites or to their blogs to broaden an audience, and they can develop new 'threads' associated with the issue for further discussion.

As such the internet can serve as an alternative vehicle for the formation of public opinion – traditionally the domain of the mass media and traditionally influenced by ruling elites (Castells, 2007). This allows for a transformation of the usual process by which mass public opinion is formed: 'What does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind, even if it could have a fragmented presence in individual minds' (Castells, 2007: 241). The data presented here demonstrate how, in the age of the internet, what begins as a 'fragmented presence in individual minds' can be transformed into a strong public message. Even in the context of a strongly censored media, postings from the internet are picked up by the mass media and the subsequent interaction between the two communication forms can produce a powerful vehicle for citizen mobilization.

In this interactive process, strong public opinion online may provide a way in which story lines can be more legitimately taken up in state-controlled mass media. Facilitated by media marketization and professionalization, public opinion can act as a mild counterweight to the need to avoid political 'minefields' and employ self-censorship (Tong, 2007, 2009; Tong and Sparks, 2009). Thus, for journalists, netizens not only provide leads for investigation, but also provide a degree of protection since it is legitimate and thus relatively safe to cover issues that already have public attention (de Burgh, 2003; Tong and Sparks, 2009). For netizens, such media coverage brings a wider audience and a greater associated potential to effect change. Furthermore, journalists have the right to interview, which is not available to netizens. Thus, only journalists can really confront involved parties with questions which demand answers. Such interview material feeds back to the internet for netizens to discuss and comment on and, in a circular and dynamic process, netizens' comments may again influence journalists to further their reporting and investigation. This process prolongs and deepens public interest in issues which might otherwise fade away from the public imagination. This has the capacity to increase pressure on government officials and offers the potential for administrative intervention. The latter is particularly desirable in China where the legal system is dependent upon administrative authority (Michelson, 2007).

This is not to imply, however, that netizens and conventional media represent the same interests. After all, the latter are obliged to perform a propaganda function in China and to 'correctly' guide, rather than follow, public opinion (Rawnsley, 2006; Zhang, 2006). However, the internet provides netizens with an opportunity to scrutinize stories as they are framed and reported, and to resist such representations where they feel they should be contested.

Thus netizens use the internet as a platform to shape the news agendas of the traditional media. At one level, in common with Lester and Hutchins' (2009) findings in a western context, this statement emphasizes and reaffirms 'the historical and cultural dominance of print and electronic news media'. At a deeper level, considering that the conventional media are controlled by the authorities in the context of China, we can see that the interplay between the two forms of communication challenges traditional power relations. The participation of netizens in the setting of the news agenda occupies a space between what the conventional media are allowed/required to report by the authorities and what they are expected to do by the public. By filling this space, netizen activity affords reporters a degree of protection when reporting the views of netizens, and thereby allows them to re-orient their reporting a little more away from the requirements of the

authorities and a little more towards the public interest. As such, with the help of the internet, netizens erode the power of the authorities to control the media which aims to 'correctly' guide public opinion and to safeguard the authority of the Party (Rawnsley, 2006; Zhang, 2006). The interplay between the two forms of communication thus reflects what Castells terms 'counter-power', that is, 'the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized' (2007:239).

The cases demonstrate the presence of this counter-power, but how strong is it? Regarding this question, the importance of these examples should not be overstated as the majority of postings exposing injustice are quickly buried online under new postings and may never spark the expression of strong public feeling. Perhaps only those cases that resonate strongly with collective sentiments have the chance to mobilize the public (Yang, 2009b). The exercise of counter-power in this format thus remains in its infancy and is limited in nature. Furthermore, when the momentum of public outcry prompts offline activism, or when the authorities feel that netizens and the media have created a situation that is threatening to run out of control, they have the capacity to rapidly impose bans on the further reporting of issues and to freeze further internet-facilitated discussion (Herold, 2008). This capacity is clearly demonstrated in the Deng Yujiao Incident.

In view of the demonstrated presence and yet weak strength of the counter-power described, it is fair to say that while the authorities vigilantly employ and fortify 'a structure of surveillance, reward, and punishment' to prevent any challenges (Scott, 1990: 193), the internet provides the general public with a valuable means to continuously test the limits of such control and quickly exploit any 'structural' weaknesses. Although other examples do not provide the kind of rich data provided by these three 'incidents', and although some of them were ultimately quashed, they nevertheless involved similar boundary-testing and reflected resistance. These examples cannot be said to have challenged the overall political structure and power relations in China and, at the end of the day, they related to narrow (while important) issues. However, they nevertheless have political implications. Ultimately such cases represent the testing of a potential erosion of state control and, with such small steps, the exercise of counter-power may ultimately produce more long-term and significant socio-political change.

Notes

1. The blog is available at: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4701280b0100ey1x.html
2. For more detail about the censorship, see the Radio France International report at: http://www.rfi.fr/actucn/articles/113/article_14007.asp

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