

China and Syria: Netizens Expose Media Fabrications and Distortions*

by Jay Hauben

My story is about netizen activity in China. But to be sure there is netizen active in virtually every society. I will add an epilogue about the Syrian crisis. Netizen activity takes many forms. Anti-cnn and my epilogue about Syria are examples of netizens as watchdogs over the mainstream and online media, but anti-cnn is also an example of the value of discussion forums.

Netizen as a vision of something new emerging and as a concept of scholarly interest was first analyzed in the research of Michael Hauben at Columbia University starting in 1992. Michael Hauben wrote that he became aware of “a new social institution, an electronic commons developing.”¹ He found social and political issues being discussed with seriousness in this online community which the conventional media and his school courses rarely if ever covered or covered only from a narrow angle.

Hauben found that there were people online who actively use and take up to defend public communication. They support open communication and oppose disruptive online behavior. He recognized this as a form of network citizenship. At the time, a net user who defended the net was often referred to as a ‘net.citizen’. Hauben contracted net.citizen into ‘netizen’ to express something new. It is an online, non-geographically based, social identity and net citizenship. He wrote, “My research demonstrated that there were people active as members of the network, which the words net citizen did not precisely represent. The word citizen suggests a geographic or national definition of social membership. The word Netizen reflects the new non-geographically based social membership....”²

The online self-identity and practice of netizenship spread around the world. Two uses of the word netizen emerged. It is necessary to distinguish between all net users and those users who participate constructively concerning social and political issues in forums and chat rooms or on their blogs and microblogs. This second category of net users comes online for public rather than simply for personal and entertainment purposes. They act as citizens of the net and are the users I feel deserve the name netizen.

To be clear, not all net users are netizens. In 1995 Michael Hauben wrote: “Netizens are not just anyone who comes online. Netizens are especially not people who come online for individual gain or profit. They are not people who come to the Net thinking it is a service. Rather they are people who understand it takes effort and action on each and everyone’s part to make the Net a regenerative and vibrant community and resource. Netizens are people who decide to devote time and effort into making the Net, this new part of our world, a better place.”³

My usage is that of Michael and similar to that of Haiqing Yu who writes, “I use ‘netizen’ in a narrow sense to mean ‘Net plus citizen’ or ‘citizen on the Net.’ Netizens are those who use the Internet as a venue for exercising citizenship through rational public debates on social and political issues of common concern.”⁴ I add, also, that netizens are not only ‘citizens on the net’ but also ‘citizens of the net’ signifying those who actively contribute to the development and defense of the net as a global communications platform.

With this concept of netizen, I want to argue that anti-cnn was a netizen activity and prototype of the watchdog function that netizens are beginning to play in China and around the world.

On March 14, 2008, Tibetan demonstrators in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region in China, turned violent. A Canadian tourist and the one or two foreign journalists who witnessed the situation put online photos, videos and descriptions documenting the ethnically targeted violence of the rioters against citizens and property.⁵ That was even before the Chinese media started to report it. The Chinese media framed the story as violence against Han Chinese and Muslim Chinese fomented by the Tibetan government in exile. Much of the mainstream international media like BBC, VOA, and CNN framed the violence as the result of discriminatory Chinese rule and Chinese police brutality.

Wide anger was expressed by many Chinese abroad when they discovered that some of the media in the U.S., Germany, France, and the U.K., were using photos and videos from clashes between police and pro-Tibetan independence protestors not in China but in Nepal and India to support that media’s claim of violence by Chinese police. One poster wrote, “Xizang terrorists raided Lasha (Lhasa), they killed more than 10 innocent people and destroyed others’ properties. But western media called such a terror a ‘peaceful’ protest. Ridiculous, isn’t it? Many western media simply say: People died in the protest. This implicitly tells their audience or readers that Chinese

government killed protests. Do they dare mention who died? who attacked whom? and who killed whom? Amazing, isn't it? Other than that, they distorted the facts by using pictures from violence in other countries and commented as what happened in China." The poster followed his post with links to 15 examples of distortions.⁶

A digital slide show was put online which contained a narrated presentation (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSQnK5FcKas&feature=related>)⁷ of 11 mislabeled photos inappropriate for the articles with which they appeared. It spread widely in cyberspace in and outside China. The slide show contains some of the photos that were put online to show the distortions and false narrative of many international mainstream media. Very crudely, the major media used photos from elsewhere to support their false story of Chinese police brutality in Lhasa in March 2008.



Screenshot of the German Channel N24

Within a few days of the appearance of the inaccurate reports, Rau Jin a recent Tsinghua University graduate launched the anti-cnn website (<http://www.anti-cnn.com>). He explained that after being part of netizen anger and discussion, he wanted to "speak out our thoughts and let the westerners learn about the truth."⁸

The top page of anti-cnn featured articles, videos and photos documenting some of the alleged distortions in the coverage of the Tibet events. The website also had forum sections first in Chinese then also in English.

The organizers set as the goal of anti-cnn to overcome media bias in the western media by fostering communication between Chinese netizens and netizens outside of China so that the people of the world and of China could have accurate knowledge about each other. They wrote on their website, "We are not against the western media, but against the lies and fabricated stories in the media."⁹ Anti-cnn was chosen as the site name, Qi Hanting, one of the organizers said, "because CNN is the media superpower. It can do great damage so it must be watched and challenged when it is wrong."¹⁰ But the site was not limited to countering errors in the reporting of CNN. It invited submissions that documented bias or misrepresentations of China in the global media.

Rau Jin quickly received from net users hundreds of offers of help to find examples of media distortions. He gathered a team of 40 volunteers to monitor the submissions for factualness and to limit emotional threads. Rau Jin and his group decided on some rules. Name-calling or attacks on individuals or groups were to be deleted. Emotional posts were not allowed to have follow-up comments.

Forum discussions were started on the topics: "Western Media Bias," "The Facts of Tibet" and "Modern China." In the first five days the site attracted 200,000 visits many from outside of China. At its maximum, the site received millions of daily hits. Over time, serious threads contained debates between Han Chinese and both Westerners and Tibetan Chinese and Uyghur Chinese trying to show each other who they were and where they differ or where they agree.

Many visitors from outside China posted on the anti-cnn English forum. Some expressed their criticism of Chinese government media censorship. In the responses to such criticism, some Chinese posters acknowledged such censorship but argued (1) it was easy to circumnavigate, (2) that all societies have their systems of bias or

censorship and (3) that netizens everywhere must dare to think for themselves and get information from many sources. One netizen with the alias *kylin* wrote, “I can say free media works the same way as less-free media. So what’s most important? The people I’d say — If people dare to doubt, dare to think on their own, do not take whatever comes to them, then we’ll have a clear mind, not easily be fooled. I can say, if such people exist, then should be Chinese... the least likely to be brainwashed, when have suffered from all those incidents, cultural revolution, plus a whole long history with all kinds of tricks.”¹¹

Often there are expressions of nationalist emotions in Chinese cyberspace, for example calls for boycotting Japanese or French products. After the riot in Lhasa, there was an upsurge of nationalist defense of China including on anti-cnn. At least some moderators on anti-cnn however were opponents of nationalism, arguing that it is a form of emotionalism and needs to be countered by rational discourse and the presentation of facts and an airing of all opinions. Moderators often answered Chinese nationalists with admonitions to “calm down and present facts.” While nationalist sentiment and love of country and anger appeared often on the anti-cnn forums, the opportunity for a dialogue across national and ethnic barriers is an expression of the internationalism characteristic of netizens.

Chinese citizens in general know that the mainstream Chinese media have a long history as a controlled and propaganda press. On the other hand, there was a wide spread assumption among people in China that the mainstream international media like CNN and BBC are a more reliable source of information and alternative viewpoints. The widespread online exposure of distortions and bias in major examples of the international mainstream media called into question for many Chinese people their positive expectation about Western media. The exposures also attracted the attention of others who questioned whether the so called Western mainstream media is any less a propaganda or political media than the Chinese mainstream media.

Over its first year, the anti-cnn website had become a significant news portal. After a year, there was a debate to determine its future. Some of the founders left. The site continued with separate forum sections in Chinese and English but became less focused than it was before on exposing media bias.

Today, the April Media Group founded by Rau Jin is a continuation of anti-cnn. It has Chinese and English language websites both known as M4 (<http://www.m4.cn/>, <http://www.4thmedia.org/>). Recently M4 had its comment section closed while the Chinese government decided how it would deal with a major political scandal.

For me the special significance of anti-cnn was that it took up the important task of a media watchdog, but especially a watchdog over the most powerful media like CNN and BBC. In an article “The Computer as a Democratizer”¹² Michael Hauben argued for the crucial role in a society of a watchdog press. In every society, major sectors of the media serve the current holders of power. Now, with the internet, there is an emerging media and journalism which tries to serve society by watching and criticizing the abuses of those with power. Anti-cnn provided for the whole world an alternative to the established media which was distorting the truth about the Lhasa riot. The net users who launched anti-cnn took for themselves a public and international mission, using the net to watch critically the main international media. In the process there was discussion and debate on difficult social and political questions. They and those from China and around the world who take up the exposures and discussion and debate are examples for me of netizens.

I want to add a short epilogue to the story of anti-cnn. This is about Syria.

Some time in early March 2011, protest demonstrations in Dara’a in Southern Syria were given a violent component. On March 17 or 18, 2011 armed people attacked policemen in Dara’a, killing 7. Media reports said at least 4 other people were killed at that time¹³. The Syrian state media framed the story as “armed gangs attacking security forces and public property.” Western and Gulf satellite media quickly framed the story that “the Syrian government is killing its own people.”

This time there was very early a massive use of videos and photos purporting to document the “crimes of the Syrian government,” not only in or on the Western and Gulf satellite media, but also on websites and Facebook and Youtube and with tweeted links. As in the case of Tibet, many net users realized that much of this so called documentation was suspicious. Using online search engines, original sources were found and posted to prove that many supposed “crimes of the Syrian government” were distortions and fabrication. Often crimes were traced to the armed opposition itself.



Wounds from an explosion in New York city posted online as the result of a Syrian government attack on Syrian protestors.

I did a brief online search using a search engine and in microblogs and Facebook on the phrase ‘Syria Distortions.’ I found net users and groups in the U.S., Tunisia, Palestine, Syria and elsewhere who were able to show that many of the videos and photos were from many places other than Syria. At blogs like Tunisian Quest for Truth and Uprooted Palestinians¹⁴ and on their related Facebook pages I found exposures of online media distortions that were very similar to those done at the beginning of anti-cnn. These sites also turned up as links sent out as tweets and the photo exposures on these sites then also appeared on many websites. The photos were found to be from the Civil War in Lebanon, from gang murders in Mexico, from Israeli atrocities in Palestine, rebel crimes in Libya, but they were all labeled as Syrian government atrocities. Some were found to be photos of mass demonstrations in support of the Syrian government doctored to claim these were in support of the armed uprising.



Photo of pro-government demonstration presented as an anti-government demonstration by adding an extra star to the flag.

I found an ongoing online war between the fabricators and the exposers. The exposures often attract a set of comments supporting the effort to have an accurate narrative. But I have not yet found where the exposures have been turned into discussion forums as happened on anti-cnn.

In my short search I also found the website Moon of Alabama.¹⁵ On that site a detailed exposure appeared when the U.S. Government distributed satellite photos claiming to show military shelling of the city of Homs. Moon of Alabama looked at Google Maps and Google Earth satellite photos to demonstrate for example that some of the satellite photos were of a Syrian military training base not of shelling of the city of Homs. Similarly the blogger argued that each of the claims by the U.S. government about these photos was false. The same blogger also viewed a video purported to be a one hour live video cast from the shelling of the city of Homs. The blogger wrote a script to guide viewers so that the level of fabrication was apparent.

In addition to the research bloggers who find and expose fabrications and distortions, there is a growing number of journalists, websites and news sources which provided an alternative account of the crisis in Syria and a critique of the Western and Gulf state media narrative about Syria. Among these are the Center for Research on Globalization, Voltairnet, Syria360, Russia Today (RT), Prensa Latina from Cuba, to name a few.

A serious analytic, research journalism with a public purpose is emerging which attempts to give a solid base so net users can arrive at an accurate understanding of crises and situations like that in Syria. Ronda Hauben calls such journalism 'netizen journalism'.

My conclusion is that the vision of netizens becoming more and more a force in society continues to be relevant and powerful. The net continues to empower people toward a greater participation in more and more aspects of their societies. As with the anti-cnn website and with the opening of an alternative channel of information, news and analysis in the Syria crisis, netizens are becoming a force not only in domestic politics but in international politics.

*This presentation was accompanied by slides which can be seen at:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/beijing2012/j-china2012-april-cafe.ppt>

Notes:

1. "Preface: What is a netizen" in *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, IEEE Computer Society Press, Los Alamitos, CA, 1997, p. ix. Also, an earlier version is online at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.xpr>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "From Active Audience to Media Citizenship: The Case of post-Mao China" in *Social Semiotics*, Vol 16 (2), June 2006, page 304. Online at: http://unsw.academia.edu/HaiqingYu/Papers/849981/From_active_audience_to_media_citizenship_The_case_of_post-Mao_China
5. See for example the blog entry by Kadfly, March 15, 2008 <http://kadfly.blogspot.com/2008/03/lhasa-burning.html>, the report on March 15 by Al Jazeera <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfnBVKrzX6Y>, the video posted on YouTube by cali2882 on March 15, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZLzKBvvGMg>. There was also a reporter for The Economist, James Miles who was in Lhasa and described on March 20 the riots in a CNN interview as 'ethnically-targeted violence' and the Chinese police response as gradual and cautious. See, http://articles.cnn.com/2008-03-20/world/tibet.miles.interview_1_tibetans-ethnic-groups-lhasa?_s=PM:WORLD
6. See for example post by FIA_cn, March 23, 2008, "Who Lie about Xizang (Tibet) Violence and How!" at: <http://www.militaryphotos.net/forums/archive/index.php/t-130727-p-6.html>
7. "Riot in Tibet: True face of western media" posted by dionysos615 on YouTube on March 19, 2008 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSQnK5FcKas&feature=related>.
8. Quoted in China Daily, April 2, 2008, http://www.chindaily.com.cn/china/2008-04/02/content_6587120_2.htm
9. Quoted in: <http://jmsc.edublogs.org/2008/04/03/chinese-netizens-war-against-western-media/>.
10. Interview with anti-cnn webmaster Qi Hanting, April 19, 2008, translated from Chinese. See Ronda Hauben, "Netizens Defy Western Media Fictions of China" http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=382523&rel_no=1
11. <http://www.anti-cnn/forum/en/thread-2316-1-1.html>
12. Online at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.x18>.
13. See, May 1, 2011, The Center for Research on Globalization in video at: <http://globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=24576> and May 3 article at: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=24591>.
14. Tunisians Quest for Truth <http://tunisianquestfortruth.wordpress.com/> and Uprooted Palestinians <http://uprootedpalestinians.blogspot.com/>.
15. <http://www.moonofalabama.org/>