

Netizens Create Anti-cnn Forum to Challenge Media Distortions of China

Who will win the contest to be the new global media, CNN or netizen media like the anti-CNN online forum and web site? This is a question that students in the global media literacy seminar at Tsinghua University in Beijing were given to grapple with as their final project.

The creation of the anti-cnn online forum and web site by netizens in China has been a significant development. The global media literacy seminar at Tsinghua University is taught by Professor Lee Xiguang. Professor Lee's background is as a journalist, covering science and technology, and as a journalism professor who is the author of significant papers about the role of the Internet in the development of the changing media environment in China. Professor Li had invited me to speak to his students in the global media literacy seminar about the spread of netizens and the impact of the Internet on society for his April 16th class.

In a future article I plan to describe the context in which this invitation came and the research I have been doing about the role of netizens in the development of a significant new form of journalism, a form of journalism which expands the spectrum of issues and problems from the more limited range common in the traditional forms of media.(1)

Shortly before my trip to China was to begin, however, something quite unexpected occurred. When the western mainstream media, from CNN to BBC, pictured the events that occurred in Lhasa, Tibet, as a peaceful demonstration, Chinese netizens immediately documented that their coverage was often inaccurate or misleading.

Within a few days of the inaccurate reports, an online forum appeared on the Internet called anti-cnn. (<http://www.anti-cnn.com>) The forum included articles and videos documenting some of the many distortions in the coverage of the Tibet events. The forum also had areas in English and in Chinese for discussion and debate.

I had discovered the online forum while still in New York and was intrigued by the fact that it not only provided an important source of clarification about the misrepresentations in the media, but also it made available a space for discussion in both English and Chinese about the importance of identifying and countering the false narrative that the mainstream western media had been creating of the events in Tibet.

While the online forum was named anti-cnn it was not limited to countering errors in reporting in CNN. Rather the founder had chosen anti-cnn for the name as CNN has a global spread and the purpose of the anti-cnn forum was to counter the misrepresentations of China and events in China in the global media.

I was particularly excited to be going to China at a time when a netizen media form had been created to critique the narratives being circulated by mainstream western media organizations.

We arrived in Beijing early in the morning on April 16, the day I was to give my talk to Professor Li's seminar.

We had arrangements to see Professor Li's assistant in order to get ready to go to the class for my talk. It was 3 pm, a little while before I was to get ready to go to the class, when Professor Li's assistant called up to our room and asked if she could come up. It was good to see her. I was in the process of putting some finishing touches on my slides for my talk.

She came into our room out of breath, explaining that she had tried to send an email, which I hadn't seen. She said that several journalists had come to debate with Tsinghua University students

about the frustrations netizens in China had with the reporting by several of the western media organizations. She urged us to come immediately with her to hear the debate.

I saved the version I had of my slides and we left to follow her across the Tsinghua University campus to the meeting between the students and the journalists.

The meeting was in a large room in the journalism building. Four journalists from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) were seated at a large table, along with Professor Li and a number of students. Other students filled the rest of the room.

The conversation was being held in English and Chinese with Professor Li doing translation from one language to the other depending on the speaker.

There were perhaps as many as 80 people filling the room.

I later learned that the journalists were probably part of a nine person delegation from the IFJ who had come to speak with the Chinese government about working conditions for the 30,000 journalists who were expected to come to Beijing to cover the Olympics.

While the purpose of the IFJ delegation appeared to be as advocates for the journalists who were to be covering the Olympics, the situation in the debate they were having with Tsinghua students was quite different. At this meeting the students were presenting their frustrations and complaints about the kind of erroneous reporting that had been documented on the anti-cnn forum and asking for an explanation of how such misrepresentations could have happened.

One of the students asked why the Western media did not report about the victims who had died in the fires set by those who took part in the riots. Another student asked why the western media reported that religious effigies had been burned but didn't report about the people who had died as a result of the fires and other violence in the riot. The student wondered why journalists would give more weight to the destruction of property rather than of human life.

Still another student asked how journalists could cover the story of Tibet if they didn't first take the time to learn the history of what had happened in Tibet in the past.

"Does a free press mean the freedom of the journalist to present his or her own personal views or does it mean the freedom for the public to know the information," asked one of the students.

Many students had hands up when there was the call for questions.

The head of the delegation, Aidan Patrick White, who is the General Secretary of the IFJ, headquartered in Brussels, gave most of the responses, though others in the delegation also answered some of the questions raised by the students.

White explained that when he went into journalism he thought it would be something connected with public service. He had since learned that there is political pressure on journalists no matter what country they are from.

The manager of the anti-cnn web site, Qi Hanting, is a Tsinghua University student. He was at the meeting and his presentation to the journalists was eagerly greeted by the students. He explained why the students were upset with the distorted coverage they had documented as prevalent in the reports of western media organizations.

Qi explained that there was a difference between a mistake in a story and a distortion. He offered as an analogy the core of an atom and the electrons surrounding it. The electrons can appear any place around the atom, but if an electron goes too far away it can break away.

Though reporters might write about different aspects of a story, he explained, their stories still can be accurate. But if the report is too far from the reality, it could be explosive.

The journalists from the IFJ responded that they weren't trying to justify bad reporting. There

wasn't a conspiracy in the western media against China. Qi proposed that there was a need to have reporters who emphasize different aspects of a story in order to help there to be the proper understanding of a story, but that was different from presenting a distorted or inaccurate presentation of the story as had happened with a number of the reports of the Tibet riot in the western media.

With less than 100 days remaining until the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, the issues and questions presented by Qi and the other Tsinghua University students to the IFJ journalists take on a broader significance. How will the 30,000 journalists who are expected to come to China to report on the Olympics, portray the story of China?

China has recently gone through a significant transformation. One indication of the changes are the many new buildings, the huge majestic structures that fill the Beijing skyline. These new structures, along with the people who live and work in them are a sign that Beijing has become a world class city. Can the journalists who will come to Beijing in August recognize that there is an important story about what is developing in China? Can they become a force to investigate this story and present it, so that there is an accurate portrayal in the media for people around the world?

This question is being considered by netizens in China and abroad.

Formerly, it may have seemed to netizens in China that the western media could be a reliable source of information about events and viewpoints that were not available in the Chinese media. Now the view that the western media could be relied on to present accurate news has been transformed in just a few short weeks in March and April 2008.

Instead netizens working together online are telling the story, not only of what they see is happening in Tibet, but even more importantly, they are documenting the failure of the western media to be a reliable source of information about China.

In place of the western media has sprung up a netizen media, contributed to by some of the 210 million Internet users in China, and some of the many overseas netizens. There are many online sites where discussion among Chinese netizens takes place.

The story of these netizens in China and abroad is an important story as they have demonstrated a resolve not to surrender the framing of the story of the Beijing Olympics to the distortions of a powerful Western media. Through their own active participation and collaboration, they are working to provide an alternative narrative.

Qi explained that the anti-cnn forum and web site has a staff of over 40 volunteers. These netizens do the technical work, and the fact checking of the posts and the responses to the posts.

If a submission to the web site is emotional, he explained, it will appear, but the moderators will not allow any responses to it in order to prevent the discussion from becoming too heated.

A post in the anti-cnn forum raised the question of whether it would be possible to create an east west cultural exchange platform to facilitate communication across the cultural differences between the Chinese people and those from other cultures who will come to China for the Olympics.

During an interview with him a few days after the debate with the journalists from the IFJ, Qi expressed his view that it can be possible to communicate despite the differences and to be able to find out where the differences lay.

Every difference has two aspects, he explained, an emotional component and a rational component.

Even if people can't agree, they can communicate, he proposed. He was hopeful that discussion would go in more communicative directions rather than netizens in China just feeling that they wanted an apology from western journalists who distort the news about China.

His hope was that the anti-cnn forum on the Internet would make it possible to have

comments on issues from a wide range of differing perspectives, rather than such differences leading to polarization and hostility.

His long term goal was that the forum become a site to support many different points of view but also where deviations from the truth would be critiqued.

Talking with Qi I found it important that he was seeking to open lines of communication with western journalists despite the fact it seemed so difficult to do so. He was actually proposing a conceptual framework to make such a communication process possible.

Listening to his views made me remember a struggle netizens had with the U.S. media in the early 1990s. There was a plan for the privatization of the U.S. section of the Internet which had been built with public funds. The U.S. press was misrepresenting the struggle of netizens who were challenging the illegitimate privatization process and who were upset with the spate of commercial ads that had begun to flood the Internet.

One reporter for the Wall Street Journal had written an article that misunderstood what the struggle was about. Netizens contacted him and asked if he would be willing to learn some of the history and background of the struggle. He welcomed the input.

The next article he wrote was very different from the previous one. It talked about how netizens were struggling over the “soul of the Internet”. This was indeed a helpful description of the struggle and it was good to see that this reporter had changed in his perspective.(2)

It is not to dismiss the possibility of journalists who are part of the western media who are interested in learning about what is happening in China and in providing an accurate portrayal. It is a worthy effort to seek out a means to make such communication possible.

The goal of the netizens who are contributing to the anti-cnn forum and web site is a goal that is an important one for China and for the many people around the world who want the 2008 Beijing Olympics to contribute to friendship and further understanding among the people of the world.

This is also a worthy goal for those of the western media and for other netizens around the world who want to be part of the creation of a 21st century media that spreads understanding rather than the political propaganda of one’s own government. The Internet and netizens have begun to create such a truly global media.

Notes

1) I recently returned from a trip to China and South Korea. This is the first of a series of articles exploring some of the important developments I encountered while on this trip.

2) Steve Stecklow, “Cyberspace Clash: Computer Users Battle High-Tech Marketers Over Soul of Internet”, Wall Street Journal, September 16, 1993, p. 1.

An earlier version of this article appears in OhmyNews International
“Netizens Defy Western Media Fictions of China”

http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?menu=c10400&no=382523&rel_no=1