

Netizen Reporting and Media Criticism Pressure for a New Journalism  
The South China Tiger, Anti-CNN and the Wenchuan Earthquake  
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*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 own (sic) their own, do not take whatever comes to them, then we'll have a clear mind, not easily be fooled.*

## I. General Background: Media in Crisis

The dominant media in China and in the US are targets of a common serious criticism. Scholars point out that the narratives that they contain are not the news but rather the picture painted under the influence of the governments and leading establishments in the respective countries (e.g., Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Li, 2003). The Chinese media, at least until recently, has been described as a party or propaganda press taking as its purpose to portray and explain the view points of the leadership and party of China and to praise socialist development and cast in a negative light western capitalism. In the US, the closeness and reliance of the mainstream political media like the NY Times and the Washington Post on government-provided information and influence and corporate ownership results in a portrayal of the world in such a way as to support and give credence to the establishment's framing of events and realities. It is not just at the US mainstream political media but also at the other major international media like CNN, BBC and Deutsche Welle that this criticism is aimed. Similar to the Chinese media, a purpose of the US and major international media has been to show the superiority of market capitalism and freedom over socialism and communism.

The critics ask, whose media are these? They point out these media fail in any obligation to oversee or supervise their respective governments. The US media is in crisis. The level of public confidence suggests a growing rejection especially after its coverage giving credence to the false story that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, justifying an invasion and occupation. The established media in China is also in crisis. Its traditional state and party support purpose cannot compete with the liveliness and breadth of internet discussion and online investigative journalism.

In this paper I will argue that netizen activity in China has served as a pressure for a reexamination and recasting of journalist practice. Netizens in China have taken many small events and made them into national discussions and calls for social or political change. The study of the case of the paper South China Tiger will show how the official announcement in 2007 of the sighting of a rare tiger was turned into an exposure of journalistic weakness and official misconduct. The study of the anti-cnn website will show the netizen exposure of serious malpractice of the international media reporting on the March 2008 Lhasa violence. That exposure by netizens cast serious doubt about the positive expectation some in China had for the international media. Having the concrete evidence of the malfeasance of international media strengthened the anti-cnn netizens to create an online forum where media events were analyzed from many angles in an international participatory process that lasted for at least one year. The study of netizen criticism of Chinese media coverage of the May 2008 Wenchuan (Sichuan) Earthquake will document failures of prominent Chinese journalists and argue the value and

impact of the media watchdog function netizens in China are increasingly playing. Journalism, at least in China, has begun to engage and benefit from this broadening of citizen participation in its domain.

## II. People in China as Media Critics

At least as far back as the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and others in the 1940s, there have been empirical studies and theoretical analyses suggesting that media audiences are not passive receptacles for media messages. More recently, Haiqing Yu (2009: 9) wrote, "Empirical research in 'active audience' studies has demonstrated that people are not ... easily fooled and manipulated by media producers." China is a good example. "Like media audiences everywhere, Chinese readers, listeners, and viewers are active interpreters of content, not passive dupes. Over time, they have learned to discern overtones, subtexts, and what is not said along with what is." (Polumbaum, 2001: 270)

Active audience theory argues that people learn to be active decoders of official messages. Many Chinese people have been and are critical readers of the state and party media. As an illustration, the story is told that when in January 1976, Zhou Enlai, a leader respected by many Chinese people at the time died, central leadership seeking to delay the announcement of that news reported that Zhou's condition was critical but still his doctors held out hope for his recovery. Most ordinary people interpreted these reports to mean Premier Zhou was dead (Naduvath, 2009: 116). Also, mass media and communications in China "have never operated as the well-oiled totalitarian machine envisioned by cold warriors." (Polumbaum, 200: 270) Artists, intellectuals, scholars, and dissidents have always more or less provided a spectrum broader than the dominant hegemonic culture sought by the party and state.

But many people in China have had the expectation that the mainstream international media would be more credible. The emergence of the internet and the netizens however have made it possible for ordinary people to share their suspicions about Chinese official media publically and to turn their critical media sense onto the faults of the international media like BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle, Reuters, etc. The internet is making possible a concrete exposure by netizens of the character and faults of both the main Chinese media and the previously respected international media.

## III. Who are the Netizens?

Internet adoption in China rapidly expanded since 1995. Such expansion continues but at a slower pace. It was reported in January 2014 by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) that there are more than 618 million Internet users in China ([http://www1.cnnic.cn/AU/MediaC/rdxw/hotnews/201401/t20140117\\_43849.htm](http://www1.cnnic.cn/AU/MediaC/rdxw/hotnews/201401/t20140117_43849.htm)). In comparison, the US was reported to have 260 million users. Approximately 80% or over 500 million Chinese net users access the internet on mobile devices. Many users in China participate in online forums, some of whom also contribute to the over 280 million Chinese language microblogs, known as weibo. CNNIC reports that a smaller set of net users are active contributors to forum and chat room discussions. Among the users who actively contribute online, I would locate net users who are "netizens", who practice some form of netizenship, that is, they defend the internet and contribute actively to it to effect social and political change.

Netizen as a concept of scholarly interest was first analyzed in the research of Michael Hauben at Columbia University starting in 1992. Hauben had participated in the mid and late

1980s on local hobbyist run bulletin board systems (BBSs) and in global Usenet newsgroups. He writes that he became aware of “a new social institution, an electronic commons developing.” (Hauben & Hauben, 1997: ix)<sup>1</sup> He undertook research to explore how and why these communications forums served as an electronic commons. He posted questions on newsgroups, mailing lists and portals and found a very high level “of mutual respect and sharing of research and ideas fostering a sense of community and participation.” Hauben 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 documented in the book, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (Hauben & Hauben, 1997) which he co-authored with Ronda Hauben that he found in this community of net users many for whom their self identity was generated by their online participation. Hauben found that there were people online who actively use and take up to defend public communication. They oppose censorship and disruptive online behavior. He recognized this identification and behavior as a form of network citizenship. He contracted “net.citizen”, the name on forums in the 1990s for such people, into “netizen” to express the new online non-geographically based social identity and net citizenship he attributed to these people.

As the Internet spread in the mid and late 1990s around the world so did the online self-identity and practice of netizenship. Two uses of the word netizen emerged. Especially in analyzing the net in China, it is necessary to distinguish between all net users (*wang min* meaning ‘network people’ in Chinese) and those users who participate constructively concerning social and political issues in forums and chat rooms or on their blogs and microblogs.<sup>2</sup> This second category is the users who come online for public rather than simply for personal and entertainment purposes. They act as citizens of the net (*wang luo gong min* meaning ‘network citizens’ in Chinese) and are the netizens of this article. The distinction must be emphasized because the Chinese characters for network person *wang min* are very often translated into English as “netizen”.

I strictly adopt the second usage. Not all net users are netizens. My usage is 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.” (Yu, 2004: 304) I add, however, 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 (Hauben & Hauben, 1997: ix-x).

In the examples and discussion to follow, it is important to recognize that the Internet is basically global. Geographic and political boundaries on the net are weaker than in the physical world. There are approximately 34 million Chinese speaking people living outside of mainland China including in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. There are perhaps at any one time 380,000 Chinese students studying aboard (<http://english.hanban.edu.cn/english/2002/Feb/26489.htm>).<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2014 there are approximately 235,000 students from China studying temporarily in the US. Many Chinese speaking people outside of China take a keen interest in social and political issues in China. Those online often participate in forums, chat rooms and blogs hosted on servers in China and outside. Chinese speaking netizens outside China gain from the richness and vibrancy of the mainland netizen community and add viewpoints, media clips and information which further enrich the information environment and discussions in which netizens in China participate. Efforts at what the government and party of China call supervision and netizens call censorship have only a limited effect in part because of the borderless essence of the

Internet. In the examples that follow it is often likely but difficult to tell whether netizens from outside China have participated.

Information and communication technology (ICT), for at least the last 20 or 25 years, has been officially promoted as one of the most important driving forces of China's economic development. The Chinese government and party actively support the spread of the Internet and its active use by people within China. Tai Zixue (2006) reports, "The Chinese government has displayed an unusual level of enthusiasm in embracing the Internet since the mid-1990s . . . by investing heavily in the infrastructure and in promoting Internet use among its government agencies, businesses, and citizens." Another scholar commented, "In China, if the government does not push, hardly anything grows so quickly." (Guo, 2006) When reporting about the Internet by media outside of China, the predominant stress of censorship in China misses this level of support and adoption. The long standing governance philosophy and practice of "benevolent" supervision and guidance in all aspects of Chinese society is still prevalent and results in the censorship emphasized by that media.<sup>4</sup> But official emphasis on "reform and opening" especially economic market oriented development is changing the nature of such supervision and guidance. The result is the rapid spread of the Internet and its active use (averaging for net users in China almost three hours per day) supported by the highest government and party officials. Broadband and mobile access was by the beginning of 2014 already available to about 40% of the population. Although still disproportionately in the urban areas and with a little over 50% of the people of China without Internet access, the level, speed of adoption and the active participation by net users is significant. A foreign journalist working in Beijing commented that users in China "are usually too busy enjoying the Internet they have to lament the Internet they do not have." And, as the examples which follow show, many of them are using it as netizen journalists with the purpose of social and political improvement.

#### IV. Case Studies

China became a particular media focus during the dramatic events leading up to and surrounding the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. This paper however will start with an example from 2007 when netizens uncovered fraud and with the eventual help of the mainstream media received official recognition of the fraud and punishment of the perpetrators and covers up.

##### **South China Tiger (2007)**

Although there have been occasional reports in China that signs of the South China tiger have been seen or roars heard, the species has been thought to be extinct in the wild. There had been no confirmed sighting since 1986. However on Oct. 12, 2007 in a press conference, the Forestry Department of Shaanxi Province in northwest China announced a verified sighting. A South China tiger, the Department spokesperson claimed, was photographed by a farmer with optical and digital cameras on Oct. 3. One photo was released. The spokesperson also said that experts had confirmed that the 40 digital and 31 film photographs were authentic. The announcement was carried in local and a few national media. On Oct 13, China Central Television, CCTV, the predominant state television broadcaster in China briefly reported about the official announcement in its Joint News Broadcast: "Recently, the rare wild South China has been found in Shaanxi after going out of sight for more than twenty years. A peasant in Ankong town, Ping county took a clear photograph of a wild South China tiger near a cliff. Experts have determined the photograph to be authentic."(EastSouthWestNorth, 2007)

But already in the afternoon of Oct 12, the one released digital photo had been posted along with the news release on a forum frequented by photographers and users of the Photoshop software application. Six hours later, a forum member raised suspicion that the photograph seemed to have been composed using Photoshop. The photo was reposted on other forums discussing photo presentation technologies. Soon a wave of doubt spread with online contributors citing irregular effects of illumination and focus, unreal fur color, lack of three dimensional effect., etc. Some netizens speculated that the digital photo may have been taken from a cardboard enlargement placed in the bushes to be photographed. The next day a self described Photoshop expert argued that based on the size of the leaves in the released photo, if authentic, the actual size of the tiger would be near that of a rat.

Comments were reposted and other online communities became involved in the dispute. Various hypotheses were proposed but there was near unanimous conviction, despite the official announcement of authenticity and the reports in the press accepting the accuracy of the official announcement, the photo was faked. National and international media picked up and welcomed the story of the sighting but also began to include mention of netizen skepticism. Experts answered some of the posts agreeing or disagreeing about the authenticity of the photos. The farmer reasserted that he had risked his life to photograph the tiger and that he photos were genuine. Shaanxi Province officials defended the announcement. Well-known wildlife photographers joined the online debate.

The demand arose online for more expert analysis of all the photos and an independent investigation of the farmer's claim. The motive of the Forestry Department was questioned. Why did it not take more time to verify the photos? Was it hoping for increased tourism or new money for a wild life preserve? The online discussion questioned even more the motives of the authorities than that of the farmer who also received reward money for the photos. One netizen posted on the Tianya Forum under the name *First Impression 1*. The post was a response to the CCTV broadcast welcoming the sighting and declaring it authentic. The netizen used Photoshop to make an animation of two photos that appeared online to show they had "identical facial features, outlines, stripes and height." He or she wrote, "At first sight, this photograph could not be more fake. The lighting, the expressions, the color, the environment ... how can this pass through the examination by experts on the South China wild tiger as well as photography experts? Did they make the examination with eyes shut?" (EastSouthWestNorth, 2007). On Fu Jianfeng's blog ([http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4776545401000bob.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4776545401000bob.html), Oct. 20 2007), it was reported that the Shaanxi "Animal Protection Bureau director Wang Wanyun . . . told the media: 'I am willing to guarantee the authenticity of this photograph with my head.'" The blogger also reported that a Chinese Academy of Science plant researcher, Fu Dezhi posted on the Yuanmu Shanchuan Forum that the leaves in the photos were either oak or hazelnut which are about 3 cm in size. In all photos one of the leaves is covering the tiger's forehead so the tiger in the photo must be part of a cropped photograph about 8 inches square. Fu Jiangfeng ended his blog writing ". . . people don't need their heads, they don't need to swear, they only need to know the truth."

On Nov 15, a netizen posted that he had found the original picture that was used to fake the South China tiger sighting. He had discovered a lunar new year's calendar for 2001 which had all the features of the photos being debated. The Shaanxi authorities responded that they would continue the investigation. Eight months later, they tried to end the 'paper tiger saga,' as it was called on the net, by announcing the photos were fake. The farmer was arrested on charges of fraud and 13 provincial officials were dismissed or disciplined for their role in the episode. But, netizen comments which followed mostly complained about official sluggishness. Despite

the efforts of the ‘pro-tiger’ officials and the experts they found to defend the authenticity of the sighting, many netizens had kept up the exposure of fraud. As in the Hwang Wu-sook case in S. Korea where netizens challenged the officially supported stem cell scientist, Chinese netizens were willing to challenge the photos as fake even when the provincial authorities and the mainstream media initially backed their authenticity. In the end the search for the truth prevailed.

Netizen attention to detail in photographs was repeated when media reports appeared especially in North America and Europe about the violence in Tibet in March 2008.

### **Anti-cnn (2008)**

On March 14, 2008, Tibetan demonstrators in Lhasa the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region in China turned violent. A Canadian tourist and the few foreign journalists who witnessed the situation put online photos, videos and descriptions documenting the deadly violence of the rioters against citizens and property (*Al Jazeera*, 2008; cali2882, 2008; Kadfly, 2008). That was even before the official Chinese media started to report it. The mainstream media in China framed the story as violence against Han 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 aboard when they discovered that some of the media in the US, Germany, and the UK, were using photos and videos from clashes between police and pro-Tibetan independence protestors in Nepal and India to support that media’s claim of violence by Chinese police. A digital slide show appeared online (dionysos615, 2008) containing an annotated presentation of 11 photos from CNN, *Der Spiegel*, the *Washington Post*, N24 German TV, BBC, *Fox News*, *Bild*, etc. The photos were mislabeled and in other ways inappropriate for the articles with which they appeared. The photos included screen shots from German TV stations that consistently labels Nepalese police as Chinese. A BBC photo showed an ambulance using it to illustrate a "heavy military presence." A photo used by CNN to show Chinese military violence was carefully cropped to hide rioters throwing rocks at a Chinese military vehicle. The slide show ended with a slide which read, ""These western media should be shamed for the reportings they've made purposely and whoever in the world, intending to slander Chinese people to promote territorial integrity of China will be doomed to failure." The slide show spread widely in cyberspace in and outside China.

Within a few days of the appearance of the inaccurate and misleading reporting, Rau Jin a recent university graduate launched the *Anti-cnn* website (<http://www.anti-cnn.com>). He explained that after netizen anger and discussion he wanted to “speak out our thoughts and let the westerners learn about the truth.”<sup>5</sup> 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 West 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.” *Anti-cnn* was chosen as the site name, 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.”<sup>6</sup> But the site was not limited to countering errors in the reporting of CNN. It invited submissions that documented bias or countered misrepresentations of China in the global media.

Rau received hundreds of offers of help finding examples of media distortions. He gathered a team of 40 volunteers to monitor the submissions for factualness and to limit emotional threads. Posts that were name calling or attacks on individuals or groups were to be deleted. Emotional posts were not to be allowed follow-up comments. Forum discussions were started on “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. Over time serious threads contained debates between Han Chinese and both Westerners and Tibetan and Uyghur Chinese trying to show each other who they were and where they differ or where they agree.

On *Anti-cnn* in answer to the exposure of the Western media practice, many visitors from outside China posted their criticism of Chinese government media censorship. In their responses to such criticism, some Chinese acknowledged such censorship but argued it was easy to circumnavigate, that all societies have their systems of bias or censorship and 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 own (sic) 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.”(<http://www.anti-cnn/forum/en/thread-2316-1-1.html>)

Some analysis of *Anti-cnn* in the Western media criticized it as a form of nationalism (e.g., Kuhn, 2008) or of being somehow connected with the Chinese government. The Chinese government and *Anti-cnn* organizers deny any connection with each other and no verifiable evidence of such a connection has been produced. There are often expressions of nationalist emotions in Chinese cyberspace, for example calls for boycotting Japanese and French products. After the riot in Lhasa, the Chinese government and media blamed the Dalai Lama and “splitists”. There was an upsurge of nationalist defense of China including on *Anti-cnn*. The moderators on *Anti-cnn* and netizens in general however are 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. The 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. Since the 1990s, there has been a commercialization of that media and more openness but still much of the national media has strong remnants from its past. On the other hand the mainstream international media had been widely assumed in China as a more reliable source of information about some events such as SARS and for alternative viewpoints. The widespread distribution by netizens like Mr. Rau of exposure of distortions and bias in major examples of the international mainstream media called into question for many Chinese people their positive expectation about that media. It 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. After western media framing of the war in the country of Georgia in August 2008 as the fault of Russia, a Russian netizen started a thread on *Anti-cnn* suggesting a Russian-Chinese alliance. He wrote, “Russian problems with the Western media are identical to Chinese problems. . . . What we need to do so that their publications about countries like China and Russia will be written in a fair tone rather than being

politically motivated? I would be most happy to hear your opinion on these matters.”(<http://www.anti-cnn.com/forum/en/thread-2413-1-1.html>)

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. As a continuation of Anti-cnn, the April Media Group was founded by Rau Jin. April Media sponsors Chinese and English language websites both known as M4 (<http://www.m4.cn/>; <http://www.4thmedia.org/>). The two sites carry news reports and comments not usually found elsewhere in Chinese media and they still carry exposures of the ongoing media fabrications for example about alleged crimes of the government of Syria.

### **Wenchuan Earthquake (2008)**

On May 12, 2008 at 14:28 in the afternoon a massive earthquake struck in south-central China. The epicenter of the earthquake was in rural Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province and measured 8.0 on the Richter Scale. The world outside of the quake zone began to learn of the earthquake one minute later, at 14:29, when a post on the "Tianya Mixed Talk" forum read, "Very Urgent!!!! Where has a massive earthquake occurred???" By 14:30 a video was posted on YouKu and by 14:35 a headline on the Baidu bulletin board reported, "Earthquake happens in Sichuan region." From then on posts escalated. Tianya is the most popular forum website and has at any moment of time on average over 200,000 simultaneous visitors. Likewise YouKu the most popular video website at the time and Baidu the most popular search engine had tens of thousands of users when the Wenchuan disaster first hit. Professional news reports began to appear at 14:46 with a dispatch by the official online site Xinhuanet (Nip, 2009: 98).

Online communication was interrupted in the epicenter. But some witnesses and survivors were able to send out messages using mobile phones which the recipients put online. Also, survivors who were able to walk or drive out of the disaster area brought with them photographs and videos they took using their phones or cameras. These began to appear online and were picked up by off line media and by CCTV. With roads destroyed and all landline telephone service down to and in the hardest hit villages, material posted by netizens gave the mainstream media some of the stories and all of the graphics for its reports.

Great concern was felt and voiced throughout China and the rest of the world for the victims of the earthquake. There was a hunger for news. Netizens started a discussion thread on "Tianya Mixed-Talk" for contributions of casualty information and estimates. As the thread was updated it was visited almost 1 million times in the first 9 hours after the quake first hit.

Netizens provided information from the disaster zone, expressed their sympathy and emotions, started to organize grassroots relief efforts, organized missing person lists and in many ways contributed online in the relief and rescue effort. Some netizens also raised serious questions. A netizen posted on the Tianya Mixed Talk forum a few hours after the quake "Some questions and reflections about this quake." He questioned why there was no early warning of the coming of such a major quake. Netizens searched for and found evidence that there were early warnings which the Seismology Bureau ignored. A netizen on Tianya left one remark, "Before May 12th, some strange nature phenomena predicting earthquakes appeared in earthquake zone and some local persons worried about earthquakes coming, but local officials and forecast agencies declared that the rumor of earthquake was baseless and people need not worry."(Xu, 2008) Mainstream journalists joined in the pursuit of this story questioning some of



the relevant officials. Netizens also called attention to the number of schools which collapsed and questioned whether the problem was systemic.

The earthquake was the main news event for many days. Government officials allowed journalists unprecedented access to the disaster zone. The internet and the off line media were watched intently for news and understanding of the disaster and the unfolding rescue effort. Criticism began to appear online of the behavior and reporting of some of the professional journalists, especially those seeming to be insensitive to the victims and survivors. One well known anchor person from the Phoenix TV station in Hong Kong, Chen Luyu, appeared at a destroyed village with heavy makeup, wearing designer sunglasses and carrying a parasol. One netizen commented, "Phoenix Chen Lu Yu, you dressed like that kind of a show at the ruins... I put many viewers to see your ugly performance ... the majority of the audience spurned your behavior, you are a very individual phenomenon, 99% of people really want to help the suffering compatriots, not to see a show." (Reese & Jai, 2009:227; Tianya, 2008)<sup>7</sup> Many other netizens showed similar distain toward Chen Luyu and other reporters who seemed frivolous or insensitive. Reese and Dai (2009: 227) reported that "[t]he 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."

Netizen criticism was also aimed at CCTV's coverage of the disaster and rescue effort. The awkwardness and insensitivity of some of its coverage was not only blamed on the reporters but also on the media organization itself. A well read blogger and former CCTV reporter Shi Feike suggested that CCTV's control over its reporters and infrequent live coverage of major disasters like the earthquake accounted for the failures of some of its earthquake rescue reporting (Shi, 2008).<sup>8</sup>

During the time of the earthquake and rescue efforts, activities of the netizens became part of the news covered by the mainstream media. But also, netizen criticism of some well-known journalists and of, for example, CCTV was widely circulated online. As a result, respect for the netizens throughout China was enhanced. One observer commented, "I am deeply touched by the patriotism and humanism shown in the activities of our netizens." Another wrote, "This catastrophic disaster aroused the civil conscience and responsibility of Chinese, and showed the power of Chinese netizens."

## V. Discussion

### **The Three Cases**

Professional or mainstream journalists in the three cases above required the collaboration of netizens and ordinary citizens for their coverage. It was difficult for the former to get to rural Wenchuan after the earthquake or to have the expertise and critical attitude of the online photographers' community. Only after netizens around the world exposed the media fabrications about the Lhasa riots was the mainstream media in China able to report about them by reporting about the anti-cnn website. But the mainstream media have more access to economic and official resources and TV and newspapers are still popular in China. Media scholars looking at China see

an emerging netizen-journalist collaboration. But besides collaboration, netizens are playing the role of media critics.

The special significance of Anti-cnn was that netizens took up the important task of media watchdog, but especially a watchdog over the most powerful media like CNN and BBC. Some scholars are calling such media practice the “Fifth Estate” because the watch dog is over the media itself. In an article, “The Computer as a Democratizer”, Michael Hauben argued for the crucial role in a society of a watchdog press (Hauben & Hauben, 1997: 315-320). In every society, major sectors of the media echo and support the current holders of power either internally or in the world. Now, with the netizens, there is an emerging media and journalism which tries to serve society by watching and criticizing the abuses of those with power and the media which serves them. Anti-cnn provided for the whole world an alternative to the 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. They took up to address journalism via exposures and discussion and debate. In the process they expanded the practice of journalism.

Similarly, at the time of the Wenchuan earthquake, netizens created a space for the public to examine and discuss journalistic operation not only at the individual level, but also at the organizational level (Reese & Jai, 2009: 228). Holding professional journalists to their own high standards was a service to the profession. Discussing the practice of CCTV, the predominant state television broadcaster in China added to netizen supervision of the official media and encouraged public scrutiny and criticism of even the official media.

## **Context**

In 2003 in China, there were numerous large scale netizen commotions and almost 58,000 officially acknowledged off line social and political ‘mass incidents’. In September 2004, the Fourth Session of the Sixteenth Chinese Communist Party Central Committee responded. The long standing policy orientation ‘Efficiency First’ was withdrawn. It had been criticized by netizens who in the course of their uprisings traced the specific problem to this systemic root. Netizens argued that ‘efficiency first’ meant putting business success before the welfare of the great majority of the people. The Central Committee replaced ‘Efficiency First’ with the policy orientation ‘Harmonious Society’. This conceptual framework seemed to be aimed at moving the focus in China away from only economic efficiency and toward a societal balance. One practice advised for the implementation of the harmonious society was to foster “interest expression” (*Li Yi Biao Da*) by accommodating more ordinary citizens’ voices in the public sphere (Lei, 2012: 135).

Some of the party and state support for netizen activity stems from this policy decision to encourage interest expression. So also does the increasing incorporation of reporting about netizen activity and netizen concerns in the mainstream media and parallel reporting by netizens and professional journalists of events which arouse netizen concern. The dominant stress of censorship reported by media outside of China hides this level of support and the rapidly expanding new use for social and political reporting, discussion and debate in China.

Every year since 2003, there has been dozens of national netizen uprisings and commotions around social and political issues, sometimes exposing fraud or corruption or questioning government actions or explanations, sometimes discussing foreign events like

disruption of the Olympic touch relay, sometimes exposing failures of the press or of star journalists. They have become a normal aspect of Chinese society.

### **Netizen Effect on Journalism in China**

Often ahead of the mainstream media, netizen uprisings set the news agenda. Local events are given by netizen activity national or international attention. In alliance with more independent journalists and editors, online issues can spread to the main stream national media and to the whole Chinese people. Netizen critical framing of issues often differs from government and mainstream media framing. When popular opinion is formed about these issues it often follows the netizen rather than the government or mainstream media framing. Also, the fight around censorship is creative and spirited not only by netizens. When journalists have stories rejected they sometimes put the stories online, often in their own blogs or microblogs (called J-Blogs). More and more the stories get out despite the imposed restrictions. Even though there is still a significant level of official media supervision and control, a growing body of critical reporting is occurring often encouraged by or encouraging netizen excitement.

Some journalists come online for their leads and to find contacts to interview. Some are emboldened by netizen exposures and numbers to dig deeper and take on more controversial topics. The result is the media environment in China is livelier than in societies with less netizen activity even if those societies have less media supervision and guidance.

Setting the agenda, framing issues, arousing public opinion and supervising the media are all aspects of political power in modern society. That the netizens in China are able to play these roles, often with the help of more mainstream journalists and editors suggests a political dynamism in Chinese society that is denied by critics of China. Netizens in China are developing into a force contributing to motion of Chinese society in the direction of greater citizen participation. Those journalists who ally with the netizens are helping a new journalism to emerge, a netizen journalism in China but also globally.

### **Appendix: Two Case Studies**

#### **Case 1: The Death of Sun Zhigang<sup>9</sup> (2003)**

To help control migration of rural people to the cities, the Chinese government had in place for more than 20 years, “Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants.”<sup>10</sup> On March 17, 2003, a college graduate from the city of Wuhan working away from home in the city of Guangzhou was stopped for an identity check. He was detained under these measures because he did not have the temporary residence card he was asked to show. In the police station he contacted two friends who came quickly to vouch for him and his employed status. The police would not release him. Three days later his friends tried to contact him and were notified that he died from a heart attack. After learning of Mr. Sun’s death, his relatives and friends contacted the local police for an explanation but received no definite answer as to what happened.

With financial help from Mr. Sun’s former classmates, his family was able to have an autopsy performed which indicated that Mr. Sun was brutally beaten before his death. One of the classmates who was studying media in Beijing posted an appeal for help concerning Mr. Sun’s

death on a cyber forum for discussion among media professionals from all over China. A journalist working for the *South Metropolitan Daily* took the post as a lead and decided to initiate interviews of the family and authorities involved.<sup>11</sup> About one month after the death, a detailed report about it appeared in the *South Metropolitan Daily* with the headline, “University graduate detained and cruelly beaten to death for not showing temporary residence card.”<sup>12</sup> On the same day, the journalist also made the report available online on the Southern Net news site.<sup>13</sup>

Following the reports, the news was picked up by editors of other online news portals. The net was quickly flooded with anger at the death and appeals for justice. Major national forums<sup>14</sup> featured extensive discussions of the detention system, the death of Mr. Sun and its implications. Other netizens commented about the obvious injustice and denial of his constitutional rights. Portal sites made the case a Hot Topic where links to related stories were gathered. Chinese language forums outside of China were also used for discussions and analysis of the case.

A memorial page was launched by a software engineer. It eventually received over 200,000 visits, many visitors leaving comments, messages of sadness and some money donations to the family. Some comments gave examples of other cases of police brutality. Others went further, demanding an end to the official policy that treated migrants as lower class citizens.

The intense online reaction influenced further reporting first by big non-governmental media and then by the mainstream national media, feeding more online ferment. A special committee was formed by the Guangzhou government to investigate Sun’s death. The subsequent blunt denial by the police of responsibility enraged many netizens. Their reaction was critical comments now focusing on the weakness of the investigation procedures.

Contributions of articles, responses, comments and calls for action appeared online from activists, lawyers, and academics all of whom had no other option where to publish their critical analysis. Online news articles typically received tens of thousands of responses. Live chat discussions formulated demands for a thorough investigation, punishment for those involved, change or abolition of vagrancy measures, and an immediate end to deportations. The combination of online outrage and mainstream media coverage made the case a topic of household conversation everywhere in China. *People’s Daily* began to publish selected netizen comments in its online news site. Pressure from online communities, social groups and the central government gave the local officials no choice but to initiate a more serious investigation. The investigators acknowledged that netizen pressure added to their determination, resulting in thirteen arrests reported. An open trial from June 5 to 9 ended with 12 convictions of guards at the detention center and some of the detainees. There was one death sentence. Twenty-three governmental officials and police officers were disciplined for their roles in the death and lack of action after it.

Even after the arrest, online petitions were circulated and online protest letters were addressed to the National People's Congress calling for abolition of the current custody and repatriation system. Such letters virtually never appear in Chinese off line media. On May 15, a netizen posted an article, "On the Violation of 'Legislation Law' by the Holding System: The Case of Sun Zhigang" on a site maintained by the government which was followed by an online examination of the existing anti-vagrancy laws. On June 18, after over 20 years of enforcement, the State Council decide to abolished the 1982 Measures under which Mr. Sun had been detained. New measures were initiated which did not allow for detention but required a system of help for homeless people be available on a voluntary basis.

The collaboration of netizen and traditional media set the news agenda and helped public opinion to form so that the death of Sun Zhigang, an ordinary person, was given extensive national coverage. This led to the relatively quick end of a long standing oppressive and discriminatory law. One scholar described this as "one of the first cases of popular opinion overriding and resetting official agendas and the first demonstration of the sociopolitical power of Chinese netizenship."<sup>15</sup>

#### Case 2: **BMW Incident** (2003)

On Oct 16, 2003, two farmers, Liu Zhongxia and her husband, rode their tractor loaded with onions through a narrow street in Harbin, capital city of Heilongjiang Province in Northeast China. The tractor accidentally scrapped the rearview mirror of a car parked on the side of the street. The car was a BMW owned by Su Xiuwen's businessman husband. Ms Su caused a commotion haranguing the two farmers because of the damage to her husband's expensive car. Then she got back into the car and drove it into the crowd which had gathered because of the commotion. Ms Liu was killed and 12 bystanders were injured.

Ms Su was tried in a Harbin court on Dec. 20. None of the bystanders testified. They had each received money from Ms Su's husband. After two hours, the court ruled Ms. Su had not been properly handling her car. The death of Ms Liu was judged accidental. Ms Su was given a two year sentence which was suspended. There was brief local media coverage of the trial and it seemed it would pass as a fatal traffic accident, one of many every day in every country.

But two days after the trial, a post about the case appeared on the Strong Nation Forum, "Attention: The BMW killed a farmer." The person posting made three main points: 1. Ms Su was related to a high ranking official. 2. Ms Su had killed Ms Liu deliberately. 3. The trial did not follow legal procedures. The post unleashed a wide spread questioning and discussion of the case throughout Chinese language cyberspace. Soon there were over 70,000 comments and opinions relating to the case on one portal alone. Many netizens saw in the incident a posing of the questions of rich versus poor in China, and justice versus corruption.

Within two weeks the BMW incident became the online hottest topic in the China. Journalists from outside the province who followed the online commotion went to Harbin to investigate and report for their newspapers. After January 8, China's mainstream national media began intensive coverage. After all this attention, local authorities and legal organs began a reinvestigation.

The online uproar over the case put it on the national news agenda and offered an alternative framing to that of the court and the local media. Almost half of the early posts looked for "behind the scenes" reasons for Ms Su's light sentence. Less than ten percent accepted the court's decision. Other netizens sought to understand the underlying causes. Some suggested remedies like greater government accountability to public opinion.

There was a growing call for the authorities to open a new investigation and hold a new trial. When it was reported in the press that province officials promised "a satisfactory solution to the 'BMW case' will be offered to the public," a post on the Strong Nation Forum titled "Why should we trust you?" precipitated a cynical thread casting doubt on the credibility of the officials.<sup>16</sup> More and more the question raised was what kind of China do we want? A netizen with the alias *stellyshi* commented that history shows that "... justice originates with the truth. But now in the world, or in China, the truth means nothing. In modern China, with power and money, you can say anything as you like. Even you can kill one person as you want. So, what is this? Is this fare (sic)? Is this so-called socialist country? I don't think so. Never!!! . . ." <sup>17</sup>

The hundreds of thousands of online posts took many forms including analysis, argumentation, poems, novels, dramas, letters, animations, and jokes. Most posts were sympathetic to Ms. Liu and hostile to Ms Su. For many netizens, Ms Su and Ms Liu, the BMW and the onion cart became symbols of the growing gap and the character differences between the rich and the poor in China. While much coverage in the mainstream media called for government transparency and social improvement, a major direction taken in netizen posts was to raise the question of the direction in which China should be going. The mainstream media called for step-by-step social improvement, the online discussion raised deeper systemic questions.

The off line media and the government in response to the massive netizen activity took more action than they would have. A new investigation was promised and a retrial of Ms Su. But by mid January the government forbade the mainstream media from any further coverage. It also required the deletion of some and finally all old posts and any new netizen contributions on the major forums and portals. At the new trial there was no greater penalty for Ms Su and the monitoring and deleting of BMW related posts caused online attention to shift to other incidents and issues including net censorship.

In this incident all the netizen activity did not lead to a different legal outcome. But it was another example that ferment around a not very uncommon event can lead to examination of

contradictions buried in society. It is arguable that this netizen uprising had an effect on Chinese society regardless of the legal outcome or the deletion of hundreds of thousands of netizen comments. And in September 2004, the Fourth Session of the Sixteenth CCP Central Committee rejected the long standing policy orientation “efficiency first” which had been criticized by some netizens who in the course of their uprisings traced the specific problem to this systemic root.<sup>18</sup>

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> "Preface: What is a netizen," an earlier version is online at <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.xpr>
- <sup>2</sup> Forum software hosted on internet accessible servers allows for sequential and threaded online text discussions which can be monitored and moderated. Similarly hosted chat room software allows for simultaneous multiple participant real time text conversations. In China, most forums allow alias registration and are often archived. Chat room sessions are ephemeral and are not easily monitored.
- <sup>3</sup> Chinese students are studying in some 103 countries and most densely populated in schools in the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, Germany, France and Japan.
- <sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Internet control in China, see Kluver 2006, <http://www.wipchina.org/?p1=content&p2=06110913375>
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in *China Daily*, April 2, 2008, [http://www.chindaily.com.cn/china/2008-04/02/content\\_6587120\\_2.htm](http://www.chindaily.com.cn/china/2008-04/02/content_6587120_2.htm)
- <sup>6</sup> Interview with *Anti-cnn* webmaster Qi Hangting, April 19, 2008, translated from Chinese. See Hauben, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Machine translated from posts in Chinese at Tianya (2008) chat forum about the performance of Chen.
- <sup>8</sup> Chinese original cached at: <http://cache.baiducontent.com/c?m=9d78d513d9d431dc4f9d92697c61c0171b4381132ba1d20208a58449e3732a475017e9ac26520775a0d20a6516ae394b9af52103331450c38cb9885dacca855e259f2745701e844b05d368f0805124b1239759ebbb5ea7e4ff68d5e890c4de274ed716403f97f0fc054b17cd6cf2033194f7c555461f56e1bc6e32e859006bc56157b733a2b6256f7186f7dd59&p=876fd416d9c11cff57eb946f5144&newp=8f78c54ad0c305fb19a7c7710f4192695803ed653c93845435&user=baidu&fm=sc&query=%BA%B4%CE%C0%D0%EC%C4%C8%CA%D0%B7%C6%BF%C2%CC%D8+2008+my1510&qid=&p1=2>
- <sup>9</sup> This case is well covered in the scholarly literature. See for example, Ibid, Tai, pp. 259-268 and other references in the following notes.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 260.
- <sup>11</sup> Shaoguang Wang, "Changing Models of China's Policy Agenda Setting," *Modern China*, 2008, 34 p. 79. <http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/1/56> (access restricted)
- <sup>12</sup> <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2003-04-25/09501015845.shtml>. See also, Haiqing Yu, "From Active Audience to Media Citizenship: The Case of Post-Mao China", *Social Semiotics*, 16 (2), June 2006. <http://www.informaworld.com/10.1080/10350330600664888> (access restricted)
- <sup>13</sup> <http://news.21cn.com/social/shixiang/2003-04-25/1021755.html>



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<sup>14</sup> Like Strong Nation Forum (qiangguo luntan), Development Forum (fazhan luntan) and China Youth Forum (zhongqing luntan)

<sup>15</sup> Haiqing Yu, "Talking, Linking, Clicking: The Politics of AIDS and SARS in Urban China," *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 15 (1) Spring 2007 <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/positions/v015/15/lyu.html> (access restricted)

<sup>16</sup> Christina Yuqiong Zhuo and Patricia Moy, "Frame Building and Frame Setting: The Interplay Between Online Public Opinion and Media Coverage," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Dresden, June 16, 2006 [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p91118\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p91118_index.html)

<sup>17</sup> Comment #11 at <http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/redirect.php?tid=39672&goto=lastpost&highlight=>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, Shaoguang Wang, note 9, p. 80