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Why Chinese print journalists embrace the Internet

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Abstract
Western media studies have largely presented the relationship between new and traditional media as adversarial, often claiming that the Internet challenges the survival of traditional journalism. Focusing on China, this article re-evaluates this relationship in a non-Western context. Relying on extensive interviews with Chinese journalists, we argue that the relationship between China's print and Internet media is symbiotic. Although it does challenge traditional business models, the Internet also helps journalists improve their commercial competitiveness and presents new channels for resisting censorship and expanding the boundaries of permissible reporting.

Keywords
Censorship, China, Internet, journalists, media, professionalism

In July 2008, journalist He Feng of the feisty *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo* 南方周末) started hearing rumors that one of China's largest dairy companies was selling tainted milk that sickened infants nationwide. The approaching Beijing Olympics meant his newspaper was banned from reporting the politically sensitive issue. Only once the Olympics had ended did a top *Southern Weekend* editor publicly disclose the censorship directive that had potentially led to further infant deaths. Crucially, he did not publish these revelations in his newspaper, since doing so could court disaster with authorities.

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Rather, he presented them on his personal blog, and from there it came to the attention of scholars and international press (Bandurski, 2008b). This incident illustrates one of the important facets of the relationship between traditional and digital media in China – the constructive role that the Internet can play in journalism practices. For He Feng, the Internet provided a channel to share politically sensitive information with a wider public and to eventually circumvent censorship.

This study engages with the key dynamics that characterize relations between Chinese journalists and new media. Based on a combined 22 months of fieldwork and interviews with over 115 mostly elite-level Chinese journalists, editors, and academics from 2006–2015, we aim to show how the Internet, despite presenting a competitive challenge, is largely an opportunity for China's print journalists. It is important to note that most of our interviewees were top journalists working for some of the most prominent papers in China, and we cannot say how representative they are of the Chinese media as a whole. In particular, many of the journalists we talked to worked for more critical commercialized papers, already the most prone to challenging censorship. We cannot speak to the extent that their opinions reflect that of China's mainline 'official media', which still aim to produce government propaganda, and are largely subsidized by the state, nor of those media dedicated entirely to entertainment. Those caveats aside, however, we have tried to account for regional variation and have concentrated on media outlets that others aspire to emulate. The interviews took place between 2006 and 2013 during field research undertaken by the authors in Beijing, Chongqing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai, supplemented by additional interviews over Skype in 2015. The sites were chosen to maximize diversity of the political and economic conditions of the media, ranging from Guangzhou's relatively politically open and commercially competitive media market to Chongqing's relatively closed and undeveloped market. Beijing and Shanghai fall in between these two extremes. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out through snowball sampling, lasting an average 1.5 hours each.

Background and literature review

The view from the west

Western-centric studies tend to argue that the emergence of new media threatens the survival of traditional media. While there are many dissenting views, the thrust of Western scholarship decries the Internet's impact on traditional media's news gathering and financial sustainability. In this article, we challenge the notion of the relationship between old and new media as largely contested. In China, we argue, the relationship can be more complementary than adversarial.

After an initial period of positive assessment on the influence of the Internet on traditional media (Matheson, 2004: 444), the Western scholarly mood has darkened over the last decade, as journalists have realized that the relationship between the old and the new media moved 'beyond competition between news outlets jockeying within the same paradigm to the opposition of multiple models of political discourse'(Carlson, 2007: 269). The Internet – and blogs in particular – have presented a challenge to the very *raison d'êtr*e of journalism. One highly cited study has found, for example, that the Internet

may hurt journalism's 'authority', ultimately 'leaving the jurisdictional area of journalism vulnerable to rival occupations, such as bloggers' (Lowrey and Anderson, 2005), and another (Carlson, 2007) suggests that blogs endanger the entire journalistic profession. A 2009 US poll of 'prominent members of the national news media' found that 'nearly two-thirds say the Internet is hurting journalism more than it is helping' (Master, 2009). Under this threat, some scholars argue that the mainstream media has both attempted to co-opt blogs (Matheson, 2004) and to attack them for 'haphazardly supplying unchecked information'(Carlson, 2007: 274).

The Internet has also brought increasing financial pressure to Western journalism. Aside from anecdotal reports of Internet pressure reducing profit margins and forcing newspapers to reduce staffing or close, one highly cited study has found 'strong evidence that digital content cannibalizes print sales'(Simon and Kadiyali, 2007: 344). This cannibalization takes place when readers abandon a print subscription to read its free online analog, with an accompanying loss of subscription and advertising fees. Ever-increasing Internet competition will eventually, some claim, kill the newspaper business entirely.

There are scholars, of course, who challenge these pessimistic assessments. 'The Reconstruction of American Journalism', a prominent 2009 report, notes that although the Internet is undermining the economic foundations of traditional journalism, it also brings positive benefits, including the potential to 'gather and distribute news more widely in new ways' (Downie and Schudson, 2009: 2). Moreover, the report suggests that the Internet has also inspired cooperation amongst former competitors (Downie and Schudson, 2009: 3) and allows an 'increasingly symbiotic' (Downie and Schudson, 2009: 51) relationship between old and new media.[1] Even in this study, however, the authors acknowledge that although 'advocacy journalism' is not in danger, 'independent reporting that provides information, investigation, analysis, and community knowledge' is certainly 'under threat' (Downie and Schudson, 2009: 8).

The generally pessimistic findings about the Internet's impact on traditional media, however, are largely based on the study of the United States (Siles and Boczkowski, 2012: 1376) and may not be representative of the wider trends. Our article takes a step in the comparative direction and contributes to the effort of 'de-Westernizing' media studies (Curran and Park, 2000) by investigating journalists' attitudes and uses of the Internet in China. In doing so, we are also responding to Benson's (2004) plea that 'political communication draws upon the sociology of news media far more extensively than has been the case in the past' (p. 276) by investigating the micro-foundations of journalists' behavior, especially in a country often neglected by Western journalism scholars.

The view from China

From analyses of command and control (Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011), to the study of online resistance (Yang, 2009), researchers have examined many facets of China's emerging electronic media. Most, however, have concentrated on the Internet in isolation from other media. Certainly, scholars have noticed that, as Susan Shirk (2011) puts it, 'Because of its speed, the Internet is the first place news appears; it sets the agenda for other media' (p. 2), but they have not moved much past the idea that there is a relationship between the Internet and traditional media. A recent study of 650 articles published

on the Internet in the four mainstream Chinese communication journals[2] between 1990–2011 found that 'most studies focused on differences between old and new media, not looking at their connections' (Wei, 2012). Studies of traditional media also only mention the Internet in passing (e.g. Polumbaum and Xiong, 2008).[3] Even the limited scholarship that has examined the relationship between the two media on a systemic scale has not delved into the motivations and attitudes of individual Chinese news workers on using the Internet. A recent study by Hassid (2012), for example, has traced the macro-scale relationship between the blogosphere and newspaper journalists, but did not examine journalists' attitudes. A rare exception that *does* engage directly with journalists' experiences is the study by Zhaoxi Liu (2012). Her analysis, however, does not specifically investigate the Internet's impact on traditional Chinese journalism. Our study builds on these previous works by examining the pressures and the opportunities that the new media have created for journalists, and by investigating the implications of the symbiotic relationship between new and old media.

Rising challenges

As in the West, the Internet has challenged Chinese journalism in three ways: economically, as subscribers and advertisers have shifted away from print media; politically, with the Internet providing competing platforms for releasing sensitive information; and professionally, as bloggers and 'citizen journalists' threaten the very essence of professional journalism. We discuss each of these challenges below and detail how China's print journalists have responded to them.

Economically, the Internet has recently started to impact the financial viability of Chinese print journalism. Compared to the West, Chinese newspapers have had a reprieve; as late as 2011, for example, the total newspaper advertising revenue was up 7.3 percent year-on-year. By 2012, however, the financial party was ending, with newspaper advertising revenue down 18 percent compared to 2011 (Lin (姚林), 2013: 42). One report estimates that in 2014, advertising money going to billboards and posters for the first time surpassed newspaper advertisements (Yeh and Zhang, 2013). As in the West, Internet pressures have forced China's traditional news outlets to fortify their online presence, to intensify their production speed, and to prioritize content over depth. This is especially prevalent in an era where Beijing and many local governments are pushing further consolidation in the publishing industry. Authorities in Liaoning province, for example, started a trial in April 2010 whereby papers that fell below 3 percent of total circulation would be 'punished' with the paper in the 'last place eliminated through competition' (*mowei taotai* 末位淘汰) (Tang (唐绪军) and Zhuo (卓宏勇), 2011: 42). At the same time, those outlets that just focus on content, without providing in-depth reporting, face the risk of losing their readership. As one Kunming-based editor puts it, 'if you are just providing facts, and your facts are not more or faster than new media, especially *weibo*[micro-blogs], you will have a hard time competing with them' (Liu, 2012: 156). Readers can now get facts – generally unverified – faster online, a phenomenon that might drive readers away from newspapers in the long term.

The rise of the Internet has further pressured traditional journalists to be ever more 'professional' and creative in order to maintain their competitive edge. One

editor at Xinhua News Agency summarized this double challenge he experiences in his work:

> On the one hand, Internet intensifies our work routine, and presents a big challenge to our business model. … On the other hand, there are now numerous blogs presenting alternative perspectives to mainstream news. If we want to compete with them, we need to cover more angles in our reporting, be more innovative, which takes time and resources that we don't always have.[4]

This is especially the case because online media can 'play edge ball' (*da ca bianqiu* 打擦边球) – or skirt close to the boundaries of acceptable coverage – by taking advantage of unique online features like the ability to host public discussion groups on sensitive topics.[5]

Finally, the Internet presents new political challenges to the Chinese newspaper business, based on differential censorship pressures for online editions. One online editor of a popular Beijing economic daily revealed that he is constantly called on by Internet censors to remove content, which makes it difficult for him to conduct his work and strengthen the online reputation of his paper.[6] This pressure is especially acute because of 'the complete absence of clear-cut rules for deciding whether or not to delete an online post' (Zhang, 2010). The Internet, therefore, exerts a myriad of new pressures on traditional journalists, but many of our interviewees are turning a challenge into an opportunity.

The Internet can offer opportunities and gains to traditional journalists

Despite the challenges, our interviewees largely believe that new media can benefit them in the long run. Journalists who have seized the Internet's opportunities can redefine their position on the media market, strengthen their economic competitiveness, carve out a distinct professional niche, and push political boundaries.

Economic and professional opportunities

Interviewees from the more adversarial commercial outlets are resolved to use the Internet's challenge as an opportunity for self-improvement. Interviews with former *Caijing* (财经) editors and reporters (many now at rival *Caixin* (财新)) show that they are not passively waiting to give up their influence to online media but are aggressively learning about successful transformation strategies. Lu Ni, a former online editor from *Caijing*, spent several months conducting interviews with editors in the United States about digital transitions. Several months later when she left with *Caijing* founder Hu Shuli to open a new magazine, *Caixin*, it already featured better multimedia and interactivity features. Some outlets have also used the Internet as a feedback channel to learn about readers' preferences and cater to them. An editor of a popular student-centered magazine explained that she learns about students' interests on bulletin board system (BBS) forums and through email suggestions. Not all commercial outlets are this adaptable, of course, but the more successful ones have embraced the new media challenge.

Our research further reveals more direct financial gains that traditional media accrue from the Internet. Although the Chinese newspaper industry started to feel the Internet's financial sting from the early 2010s, some news workers argue that in the long run Internet portal sites can help strengthen the financial position of Chinese newspapers. Internet portals (*menhu*门户) like Sina, Sohu, and QQ.com are enormously powerful in shaping China's public discussions online, in contrast to their American equivalents. Four of the top 10 most visited sites in China in 2014 describe themselves as portals (QQ, Sina, Hao123, and Sohu), compared to only one in the United States (Yahoo!).[7] The infidelity of actor Wen Zhang, one of the biggest stories of 2014, attracted nearly *7 million* Internet posts on Sina's portal and *weibo* (Sabrina, 2014), highlighting the public appeal of Internet portals. Despite this position of strength, however, portals are legally barred from producing their own news content. Instead, they must rely on 'reprints' (*zhuanzai*转载) from newspapers and wire services, generally paying newspapers a flat yearly fee – around RMB 100,000 (US$ 15,000) per year in 2007 - for use of their stories.[8] Although interviewees commonly complained that the portals paid too little, this system keeps them from becoming a direct (and better-funded) competitor to the print media. The result of this regulation is symbiosis: portals need newspapers to provide content, and the newspapers in turn need portals to publicize their articles, attract readership, and pay subscription fees. Indeed, some portals have even been known to pass a juicy story to newspaper reporters so it can appear in print, giving the portal license to then 'reprint' their original story and skirt the ban on producing original content.[9] Or, as another reporter notes, China is a huge country, and the portals will always need local media partners to cover local news.[10]

As for redefining their niche in the media market, some journalists maintain a strong confidence that the Internet increases a demand for 'professionalism'. Media professionalism has long been a fraught concept even in the West (Tumber and Prentoulis, 2005), and in China arguably more so. In China, some argue, professional journalists are those who endeavor to uphold ethical norms and, perhaps more importantly, see themselves as performing a public service (Hassid, 2011). This idea of public service implies that reports are delivered quickly – and accurately – to the public. While any blogger can print rumors, 'professional' journalists are seen as those able to process large amounts of information, and sift the wheat from the chaff. For example, an editor with *Southern Weekend* argues that given the untrustworthiness of the Internet, there will always be space for professional journalists to play the gatekeeper role.[11] As for journalists who work for the state or the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) sponsored papers, they serve to channel official propaganda – a role unlikely to wane in the new media era. As a journalist at a paper run by China's Ministry of the Environment notes, such official bodies will always need propagandizing journalists, whether online or off.[12]

Political opportunities

In addition to providing new economic and professional impetus to traditional journalists, interviewees argue that the Internet can facilitate the effectiveness of investigative, critical, or politically sensitive reporting. Many of our interviewees spend large amounts of time online, looking for breaking news, chatting with colleagues via MSN Messenger

and QQ, or receiving tips electronically from potential sources. For topics not explicitly censored, journalists refer to the 'spilling news technique', or sharing sensitive stories with colleagues from other publications when pressure from local officials means they are unable to cover it themselves. Online connectivity is integral for the effectiveness of spilling news technique as journalists across different regions share information on sensitive topics (Repnikova, 2013). This practice of circumventing local restrictions by passing news to colleagues in other jurisdiction (known as *yidi jiandu* (异地监督)) was officially banned in the mid-2000s but still prevails in practice (Bandurski and Hala, 2010; Liebman, 2011).

Other than getting information on news stories, some interviewees also noted that the Internet offers the political advantage of revealing previously obscure or hidden official information, simplifying many investigative journalists' work. 'The Internet is a huge engine forcing authorities to open up to the public. … [and] produces many information leaks', explained a former *Caijing* editor.[13] When an enormous series of snowstorms in 2008 paralyzed whole provinces and showed the inadequacy of local disaster preparedness, many jurisdictions banned reporting on the severity of the crisis. By reading the blog posts of local residents, however, one magazine journalist was able to reveal the real story of the hardships residents faced.[14] Another interviewee pointed to the example of the famous 'Chongqing nailhouse', a prominent 2007 news story about the resistance of one Chongqing family to intense pressure from developers and the local government to vacate their house, which in the end was entirely surrounded by a 10 m deep construction pit. What would have gone unnoticed in previous years became a national cause célèbre as blogger and 'citizen journalist' Zola (Zhou Shuguang) publicized the story, which was quickly picked up by China's traditional media (Ewing, 2007).

Journalists argue that the Internet can serve as an excuse as well as an additional channel for publishing sensitive reports. Once a news item has been discussed enough online, many journalists reason it becomes publishable in the mainstream media regardless of sensitivity. One scholar has estimated that of 77 major Chinese social events, 23 appeared originally on the Internet before receiving mainstream press attention.[15] Some journalists, like senior reporters at a commercial paper, even report that their colleagues post sensitive stories online, encourage these stories to spread, and then discuss them in print.[16] In other words, the Internet can serve as a backdoor way to bypass censorship, Given that the top 20 online events in 2010 received over 300,000 comments each on just a few discussion boards, this can be an effective strategy for publicizing issues (Dahong (闵大洪), 2011: 132). We heard about a number of examples similar to the case we introduced at the beginning of our article, where journalists discuss their investigations in blogs or other anonymous online platforms. However, this strategy may be facing pressures now that China's two enormously popular micro-blogging platforms, Sina Weibo and QQ Weibo, require posters to register their real names. Despite the requirement, there are numerous ways around this forcible registration,[17] and the fact that the Party/state keeps re-emphasizing real name registration implies that it has previously failed in making it universal (*Reuters*, 2015). If Chinese authorities are serious about enforcing such regulations, journalists' use of blogs and micro-blogs to circumvent press restrictions may decline.

Some journalists also set up blogs that resemble professional online media outlets, covering controversial issues in more depth and from more perspectives than the print media. The Bolian blog is a good example, created by a veteran Xinhua reporter who finds online reporting more independent, entrepreneurial, and meaningful.[18] This trend of traditional journalists setting up alternative news sites extends to other authoritarian regimes like Russia, where some journalists' blogs enjoy widespread popularity and alternative news sites are often cited more often than traditional news outlets.[19] Such bloggers must be careful; they can legally 'discuss' the news in China but not break it.[20]

The Internet can also increase the effectiveness of investigative reports by helping journalists attract greater public attention to revealed problems; this attention, in turn, may increase pressure on officials to react. Indeed, the Chinese government seems particularly responsive to certain kinds of online public pressure, even compared with some democratic countries (Hassid and Brass, 2014). A number of interviewees mentioned how public online discussion of the issues raised in the media improved journalists' effectiveness in holding officials to account. 'Internet for the common people is a sort of manna! The progress it brought to public discourse and democratic reform is irreversible', exclaimed an investigative journalist from *Caixin* magazine.[21] Or as a Chinese media scholar put it, 'the Internet is making great strides toward changing the dissemination of public information in China'.[22]

From 2010 to 2013, Twitter-like micro-blogs known as *weibo* – and particularly Sina Weibo – became enormously popular among Chinese news workers. Many of our interviewees were optimistic that *weibo* was particularly conducive to advancing Chinese journalism, pointing to the 2011 Wenzhou train crash as an example of what *weibo* and traditional media working in concert could achieve. Despite killing dozens and injuring hundreds of riders on China's then brand-new high speed rail system, the crash was initially censored. Train riders' posts on Sina Weibo about the crash, however, rocketed around China, quickly leading to an online uproar about lax safety standards and poor accountability at the Railway Ministry. The traditional media, who were looking to pay back the politically powerful Ministry for years of suppressed corruption scandals,[23] gleefully took up the charge, and a combination of media pressure on and offline forced reorganization of the Ministry and the sacking of top officials (Osnos, 2012). This case also showcases the cross-fertilization between electronic and traditional media, with 10 million *weibo* posts on the disaster inspiring an estimated 18,000 articles across China's traditional media (Sun (孙旭培), 2013).

Since this heyday, however, Chinese authorities have repeatedly cracked down on prominent *weibo* users – including journalists (Chin and Mozur, 2013). Even before the crackdown on 'false rumors' began to bite in early 2014, many users had already turned to a newer service called WeChat (*weixin* 微信) that offers more privacy than *weibo*. Unlike *weibo*, WeChat requires users to be added to different groups in order to partake in conversations. A survey of 705 randomly selected Sina Weibo users conducted by Hassid and a commercial survey firm found that, as early as August 2013, more than 65 percent of non-professional and 70 percent of 'professional' respondents (including journalists) were already using WeChat in addition to Sina Weibo. Our latest interviews with journalists highlight the advantages and the disadvantages of WeChat. On the one hand,

it is relatively less censored and still offers a safe haven for reporters to discuss sensitive stories, including those already censored by authorities:

> WeChat is actually a private social space, but you will see many journalists using WeChat as a backup 'battlefield for speech' to express their opinions on politics and social affairs … I would say now it's becoming the dominant platform for that,

commented an investigative reporter former at *Caixin* in a 2015 Skype interview.[24] At the same time, interviewees note that WeChat serves more as a communication channel among journalists than as a mechanism for mobilizing the public, for which Weibo still remains an important platform.[25] Journalists further note that censorship of WeChat has intensified in recent months, creating yet another platform for contention between journalists and officials. 'Whereas in the past it would take a long time for a WeChat post to be deleted, now some sensitive messages are erased minutes after original posting', shared another reporter.[26] Regardless of the specific tools that journalists use, the basic symbiosis between emerging and traditional media remains intact and important to understand.

Advocate journalists in particular, those who 'aim to push a specific, social, ideological, or economic viewpoint in their stories',(Hassid, 2011) often see the Internet as a vehicle for solving many of China's pressing social problems. These advocates, who often 'claim to represent "vulnerable social groups" (*ruoshi qunti*弱势群体) in an attempt to better their plight' tend to see their role in nationalistic terms (Hassid, 2011). By helping to solve problems, many advocate journalists argue they are doing their part to build a better China. For these reporters, the Internet represents a spectacularly successful way to publicize the social problems they aim to resolve. And because such reporters are often more interested in solving problems than in producing 'scoops', the Internet is a potent tool to help them in their quest to slowly reshape Chinese society.

And finally, the Internet can ameliorate potentially negative consequences of journalists' sensitive reporting. Even for newspapers and reporters already in trouble for ruffling too many official feathers, the Internet can help limit their damage. For example, one former high-level Xinhua news agency editor argues that while in the past censors would have to quarantine and pulp an entire newspaper to limit the damage from a single article, now online censors can simply excise the offending piece.[27] Assuming that the problems are caught before the newspaper is printed, such a surgical strike can save the newspaper a great deal of money and perhaps avoid further complications for those responsible. Thus, the Internet can have a financial impact on newspapers – but a positive one.

Online journalistic networks can also help journalists mutually assist when they get in trouble with authorities in the process of investigation or publishing a sensitive report. An investigative journalist from *Southern Week* [*Nanfang Zhoukan* 南方周刊] elaborates on this development in some detail:

> There is a journalists' association in China, but it doesn't provide much help to journalists. The informal journalists' community is far more effective. Journalists in commercial newspapers know each other well; they partake in a QQ group, and constantly communicate with one another. Once a journalist is in trouble, others quickly come to his rescue. For instance, a few

> months ago my colleague went to Hubei with a reporter from Beijing News [Xinjing Bao 新京报] to investigate the Deng Yujiao case.[28] When they were interviewing Deng Yujiao's grandmother, a gang of people assaulted them. My colleague immediately called me to publicise this on weibo. I did not expect this message to flood the Internet a day after I published it. As a result of this public outcry my colleague and the other reporter were quickly released.[29]

A similar dynamic helped publicize the death of *China Trade News* reporter, Lan Chengzhang, who was apparently beaten to death for his temerity to investigate an illegal coal mine near Datong, Shanxi province. News of the attack 'was widely circulated among the reporter circles on the Internet', and the matter was ultimately reported in the *Southern Metropolis News* (*Nanfang Dushi Bao*南方都市报) (Renwei, 2007). As a result of the massive attention that these stories generated, the perpetrators were ultimately arrested and the illegal coal mine owner jailed for life (BBC News, 2007).

Other scholars have noted some of the relationships we point to between print and electronic media. Zhaoxi Liu (2012), for example, has argued that journalists can now 'push the boundaries in different ways, including [through the] active use of digital technology and social media' (p. 1). Marina Svensson (2012) has analyzed the growing importance of the Internet in facilitating the emergence of a shared community among China's investigative reporters, arguing that new media provides a useful platform for journalists' interaction and collaboration. Zhang Zhi'an has examined the role of *weibo* in transforming investigative reporting, finding that practice has shifted more toward 'social production': actively engaging the public and making the profession more open and transparent (Zhang , 2012). And China experts like Guobin Yang (2009) and Yongnian Zheng (2008) have also examined – though not systematically – the ecosystem shared by print and new-media journalists in China. Our study, however, presents the first comprehensive analysis of these interactions, detailing the different facets of journalists' engagement with the Internet and the wide range of opportunities it opens up for journalists in pushing the boundaries of the permissible.

What is behind China's print/Internet symbiosis

Chinese journalists engage with the Internet differently than Western ones, a difference rooted in the particularities of China's state-society and state-Internet relations. The Chinese political system has been characterized in recent studies as 'consultative authoritarianism', meaning that the party-state is eager to understand and respond to public opinion in its policy-making processes (He and Warren, 2011; Teets, 2013; Truex, 2014). The Internet has facilitated and expanded these consultations by providing a new channel for different societal groups, including journalists, to channel public grievances to the Party/state. Other societal actors, including protesters and non-governmental organization (NGO) activists have similarly made use of the Internet to mobilize public support for their causes and attract attention from authorities (Sullivan and Xie, 2009; Yang, 2009).

Moreover, interactions between Chinese state and society have been characterized by fluidity and a high degree of mutual adaptability (Yang, 2014). Restrictions applied to social activism, including in the journalism sphere, are notoriously uneven – unevenness

that results from a fragmented political system and the divergent objectives of local and central officials (Stern and O'Brien, 2012). Activists, in turn, have been conceptualized by some scholars as 'policy entrepreneurs', taking advantage of various loopholes to push their agenda while negotiating a treacherous political environment (Mertha, 2010). In such a dynamic landscape, the Internet presents a new mechanism for battling Party/state control. This phenomenon is not unique to China but common to authoritarian regimes where social media can allow practicing journalists an escape from censorship and surveillance. In Russia for example, investigative journalists have similarly stressed the significance of the Internet in improving their networking opportunities and helping them feel safer while reporting on sensitive subjects.[30]

Finally, the modes of state-media and state-Internet relations empower symbiotic ties between journalists and the Internet. Unlike Western countries, where media generally manage their own financial survival, in China, all traditional media are still owned by the Party/state. Even the most commercialized outlets are technically owned by a Party/state sponsor, even when investment capital is provided by private individuals.[31] In addition, authorities partially pre-empt media competition with the Internet by tightly controlling the evolution of news gathering and discussions online. As explained earlier, China's portals are legally forbidden from carrying out independent news gathering and must use reprint content from traditional media. Whereas in the West, many online news outlets present alternative financial models to that of traditional press; in China, such competition is more timid. The collaborative ties between China's traditional journalists and the Internet, therefore, are embedded into the larger socio-political landscape, which manifests stark differences from liberal democracies.

Implications of the collaborative relationship

In general, competition from new media is likely to strengthen the reputable and the more adaptable traditional outlets, while weakening smaller, less innovative ones. Our interviews show that media with a viable Internet strategy perceive it as being in their long-term commercial interest. However, most of the reporters we talked to are among the elite minority of Chinese news workers based at more noteworthy companies, and therefore enjoy a privileged position of experimenting and collaborating with the Internet. Other smaller and less established outlets might be more focused on day-to-day survival.

As for changing state-media relations, journalists' increasing capacity to expand political boundaries with the help of new media has intensified tensions between the media and China's censorship apparatus. To counter journalists' attempts to evade censorship, authorities constantly impose new restrictions on news workers' use of new media. Interviews with officials from the state's General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP),[32] for instance, reveal recent attempts to curb journalists' online postings and have specifically aimed to dissuade the sharing of unpublished stories.[33] Under Xi, authorities have placed new restrictions on journalists' activities online, most recently under the pretext of protecting 'state secrets'.[34] Some journalists further admit that over time they have become more cautious about their participation on *weibo*.

At the same time, a former *Southern Weekend* editor notes that

> China's investigative reporting has been developing in the past decade due to *weibo*. It makes it hard to conceal information. There is a constant friction between authorities who try to regulate it and the users who find ways to bypass the restrictions.[35]

Even if journalists themselves are reluctant *weibo* posters, they still benefit from the information posted by ordinary netizens in conducting their investigations. Moreover, as we have discussed, journalists have continued the move to WeChat, a platform with more privacy than *weibo*, but one increasingly contested by media regulators. The growing tensions between journalists and the Party/state, therefore, are likely to persist, as journalists embrace technological tools that officials aim to restrain.

And finally, the strategic opportunities that journalists embrace can have serious and somewhat contradictory implications for state-society relations. Journalists and scholars agree that the Internet can facilitate public responsiveness and accountability of Chinese officialdom. The combination of critical investigative reports in traditional media and widespread public discussions of these reports online can lead to faster and more effective responses from political authorities. At the same time, however, the combined force of traditional and online reporting can undermine the independence (and capacity) of other accountability mechanisms in China such as the judiciary. One former editor notes that although the Internet often generates public pressure over issues which are then picked up by traditional media outlets, this pressure is often used in trials and can illustrate the arbitrariness of the Chinese legal system. In one 2002 case, for example, 'Prior to and during the trial, the news media referred to the defendant as a "criminal," and at least one paper ran a headline stating that "execution will be too light a punishment"' (Liebman, 2005: 72). As a result of such pressure, the defendant was swiftly executed. Given China's weakly institutionalized judiciary, such outcomes are all too common when the media bring public pressure to bear on prominent cases.[36] While media regulations promulgated by the Supreme People's Court are designed to

> properly handle the relationship between the media and the courts, guarantee the public's right to know (*baozhang gongzhong de zhiqingquan* 保障公众的知情权), the right to participate, the right to express opinions, and the right to supervise (*jiandu quan* 监督权),[37]

in practice the media often bring inappropriate pressure to bear on the Chinese judiciary. As Liebman (2005) puts it, 'The judiciary continues to suffer from numerous weaknesses … including both lack of autonomy and lack of public confidence. Courts have thus been ill prepared to resist expanded media pressure'. (p. 6)

In addition to potentially constraining other accountability mechanisms, the Internet can also incite nationalist public opinion to work against journalists' efforts. For example, Chang Ping, then an outspoken editor at *Southern Metropolis News* published a 2008 article in the Chinese language version of the British *Financial Times* that condemned the knee-jerk criticism Chinese netizens directed at the Western press in the wake of unrest in Tibet. This opinion was not well received on the Chinese Internet; one popular blog post began, 'Chang Ping is a Chinese traitor, and the *Southern Metropolis Daily* is the Chinese edition of CNN'.[38] In response to attacks on Chang Ping and his paper by irate netizens, he was removed as deputy editor of a sister publication (Bandurski,

2008a). As David Bandurski of the China Media Project puts it, 'There is little doubt … that [Chang's] recent writings on the issue of Tibet and Chinese nationalism prompted Chinese Web users and other mainstream Chinese media to heap scorn and vitriol on Southern Metropolis Daily'(Bandurski, 2008a). In the Internet age, public opinion can serve as a double-edged sword – sometimes helping and sometimes hindering journalists' goals.

Conclusion

We have shown that the relationship between print journalists and the Internet is not as straightforward as it might appear to many Western press scholars. While many of these academics and journalists are wringing their hands over the 'death' of the newspaper in the West, Chinese journalists are much more sanguine about their prospects in the Internet era, even as revenue has started dropping. Serving as an informant, a protector, and even a paymaster, the Internet's role is much more nuanced in China than Western scholarship might suggest. Unlike the largely adversarial relationship seen between new media and traditional journalism in the West, in China, the two seem to be in dynamic coexistence. This symbiotic relationship is a product of China's complex socio-political landscape but also directly shapes the evolution of China's media, politics, and state-society relations. Over time, though, we are likely to observe ever more friction between journalists and power holders as both struggle to adapt to a changed media landscape.

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Notes

1. For other exceptions, see Pavlik (2001). Siles and Boczkowski (2012) provide an excellent overview of this literature.
2. The English names of the four are Journalism and Communication, Modern Communication, International Communication, and Journalism Communication.
3. Yuezhi Zhao (2008) is an exception with a chapter using a case study approach on the relationships between newspapers and the Internet.
4. Repnikova's interview with editor at Xinhua News, 5 January 2010
5. Hassid's interview GM05-2
6. Repnikova's interview with online editor of a popular Beijing economic daily, 9 December 2009
7. Alexa.com, accessed 20 January 2015
8. Hassid's interview GM14-2A.
9. Hassid's interview GM14-2A.
10. Hassid's interview HE24-2.
11. Hassid's interview HL9-4.
12. Hassid's interview HH12-2.
13. Repnikova's interview with former online editor of *Caijing*, Beijing, 5 November 2009.
14. Hassid's interview HH05-2A.

15. Chinese communication professor, personal communication.
16. Hassid's interview HL2-2.
17. See, for example, http://www.techinasia.com/post-sina-weibo-registering-real/ (accessed 18 April 2012).
18. Repnikova's interview with founder and editor-in-chief of a popular political blog, Beijing, 10 December 2009
19. Repnikova conducted fieldwork in Moscow, interviewing journalists and editors of both traditional and online media outlets in April 2010.
20. Hassid's interview GM14-2A. Repnikova's interviews with various blog editors also confirmed this regulation.
21. Repnikova's interview with journalist at Caixin, Beijing, 15 November 2009
22. Hassid's interview EL28-0
23. Hassid's interview KX24-2Z
24. Repnikova's interview with Caixin journalist, 4 February 2015
25. Repnikova's interview with media commentator, 7 February 2015
26. Repnikova's interview with journalist at Caixin, 8 February 2015
27. Hassid's interview EY24-1
28. Deng Yujiao, a 21-year-old pedicurist, was initially charged with killing a local official who was attempting to rape her, but after a massive outcry online received a minimal sentence. See Wines (2009).
29. Repnikova's interview with journalist of *Southern Week*, Beijing, 10 November 2009
30. Repnikova conducted over 30 interviews with Russian journalists in April 2010.
31. Even heavily commercialized papers like *Caijing* – a paper initially funded by 15 private investors (Osnos, 2009) – require a Party/state sponsoring 'owner'.
32. The GAPP was merged with another agency in 2013 to become the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, *Guojia Xinwen Chuban Guangbo Dianying Dianshi Zongju*).
33. Repnikova interviewed top officials at the GAPP in the summer of 2012.
34. http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/china%E2%80%99s-media-regulator-places-new-restrictions-on-journalists-and
35. Repnikova's interview with a former editor of *Nanfang Zhoumo*, Beijing, 20 July 2012
36. For more on China's efforts to build its judicial system, see Stern (2013).
37. Certain Regulations Issued by the Supreme People's Court Regarding the People's Courts Accepting the Supervision of the News Media (最高人民法院关于人民法院接受新闻媒体舆论监督的若干规定), issued 8 February 2009, reprinted in Chinese Academy of Social Sciences News Research Institute (中国社会科学院新闻与传播研究所) (2010) China Journalism Yearbook (中国新闻年鉴). Beijing: China Journalism Yearbook Publishers (中国新闻年鉴社, p. 38.
38. Chang Ping's original article and this blog post are available in English translation from EastSouthWestNorth, the prominent blog of Roland Soong. See http://zonaeuropa.com/200804061.htm, last accessed 19 April 2012.

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