# Blogs and China Correspondence:
# Lessons about Global Information Flows

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent research points to the evolution of a symbiotic relationship between bloggers and the professional news media, in which blogs influence and supplement the work of journalists but do not appear to be replacing it entirely. Such relationships are developing not only on a country-by-country basis but also on a global scale, assisted by the phenomenon of "bridge blogs." Will this lead to a more democratic global information order? This paper examines the China case, and the emerging relationship between blogs, bridge blogs, and foreign correspondents who cover China. It concludes that if blogs and citizen media are contributing to a more democratic global information order, it is more

of a "representative" form of democracy – not a pure "many to many" global discourse that many Internet idealists had hoped.

**Introduction**

Whether professional journalists, news editors, or journalism school deans like it or not, blogs have become part of the global media ecosystem. While a rapidly-growing body of scholarship is examining how blogs are changing the U.S. media landscape and influencing the American political discourse, scholarship examining how blogs are impacting global information flows is even more nascent. Optimists hope that the Internet, and the rise of easy and inexpensive publishing tools such as blogs, will be able to create an egalitarian "Global Public Sphere" through which the world's citizens via "global civil society" can engage with one another on matters of common concern – in ways that television and other earlier forms of media have failed to deliver (Volkmer, 2003; Castells, 2008).

But the evolving reality appears more complicated. Will blogs make the work of foreign correspondents less important now that citizens around the world can create their own media and talk to one another directly? Or will various national and regional "blogospheres" form a new layer of "interpretive community" from which professional journalists can draw story ideas, and to which journalists can turn as they seek to gauge the significance and meaning of the events they cover? Is it true that any articulate citizen

now has the ability to impact the way in which the global media covers his or her country, just by starting a blog? Or are we instead seeing the rise, in classic "power law" fashion, of a small number of influential "bridge bloggers" who are trusted by journalists to help interpret – and often translate – the local online discourse and help parse its global significance? It is not possible in one short research paper to answer these questions definitively.. Instead, this paper examines one small part of the picture: the relationship between Chinese bloggers, "bridge bloggers" who write about China, and foreign correspondents who cover China.

This author is a former China-based journalist who has been blogging since early 2004. Beginning in 2005, a growing number of "China correspondents" – non-Chinese journalists who report about China for a living for foreign news organizations – began to tell me that they and their research assistants regularly follow blogs. These blogs include Chinese-language blogs written by Chinese people as well as English-language blogs written by various specialists who live in China. Meanwhile, it has grown increasingly common to observe a story about an event or issue in China appearing first on a blog, then in a foreign newspaper report or wire story several days later. There is clearly an evolving relationship between bloggers and China correspondents. This leads to several questions: To what extent do blogs impact the stories written or broadcast by China correspondents? In what ways do China correspondents find blogs useful? Do particular blogs have notable influence on China correspondents and if so, which ones?  Who are these bloggers and why have they gained such influence?

This paper is an initial attempt to explore these questions based on literature review and years of observation by the author as a blogger and journalist reporting about China.

Data from a small-scale survey of foreign correspondents who cover China is included, not for the purpose of conducting standard quantitative analysis or hypothesis testing, but to introduce and raise key issues about whether and how the emergence of blogs as a form of online "citizen media" may improve the outside world's understanding of China – and what the broader implications for global communications may be.

## Blogs, Journalism, and Global Information Flows

Since the advent in the late 1990s of technically simple and low-cost "web log" authoring software and hosted "blogging" platforms, any literate person with an Internet connection has had the ability to create and globally disseminate media with only Internet service. While the majority of the world's roughly 100 million "bloggers" produce what are essentially personal diaries, the genre of blogs studied by media scholars are those described as "externally-focused, news-aware" bloggers (Thelwall, 2006, p.7). It is this type of blogger who tends to garner larger audiences beyond his or her immediate social circle, and who contributes substantive discussion of global issues, as in the case of the 2005 London bombings or the Danish cartoon controversy of 2005-06 (Thelwall, 2006; 2007).

Blogs began to have substantial impact on news stories in the United States and elsewhere in 2003 and 2004, and have played a growing role alongside traditional news media in American political discourse (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). Blogs are used as sources for story ideas, tips, and background information for growing numbers of journalists (Glover, 2006). A large-scale survey of journalists conducted by Columbia Journalism School and Euro RSCG Magnet in 2006 found that more than half of the

journalists claimed to use blogs, and 70 percent of those who use weblogs did so as part of their journalistic work – despite significant levels of skepticism amongst journalists about whether blogs should be considered a "legitimate source of information" (Euro RSCG Magnet and Columbia University, 2006, p.3).

The work of Pamela Shoemaker on news "gatekeeping" (1991) and Barbie Zelizer's work on journalists as "interpretive communities" (1993) have documented, respectively, how the structure of news organizations as well as the culture of journalism exert strong influence on decisions about what is or isn't newsworthy, and how stories should be covered. Blogs have managed to crash the news gates and hack their way into the interpretive community's collective sense of what the public needs to know. Yet while scholarship on the relationship between blogs and journalism is still in its infancy, initial work indicates that blogs are not replacing traditional news media. Instead, blogs are adding a new layer to the media ecosystem and extending the public discourse to new groups of active participants who previously lacked the connections, economic resources, or other assets that have traditionally enabled some groups to gain greater attention in and impact on mass media than others (Reese, et. al., 2007). Blogs and other new forms of online "citizen media" have begun to fill "gaps" not well-occupied by the work of today's journalists. One such gap involves "hyper-local" issues and events to which news organizations cannot afford to devote sufficient staff (Glaser, 2004). Bloggers have been described as "feeding" on news that has been "discarded" or overlooked by news organizations. The fact that these discarded subjects have on numerous occasions garnered widespread public interest has in turn challenged the long-held editorial assumptions and norms governing the work of news organizations, causing re-

examination and adjustment by the profession as a whole. Fear of being "caught out" by the blogs is a major reason why journalists now deem it necessary to follow blogs that often discuss issues and information related to their beats, despite lingering questions about blogs' reliability (Lowrey, 2006). As a result, studies show that in the United States, journalists are much heavier consumers of blogs than the general public as a whole (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007; Euro RSCG Magnet and Columbia University, 2006).

Of course, not all blogs are equal in their influence. As they grow and mature, research shows that blogospheres tend to evolve in classic "power law" fashion: a very small subset receive a disproportionate amount of the total traffic and attention (Shirky, 2005). A relatively small number of "A-list" blogs in the United States are thus able to exert substantial influence on the mainstream news media and public discourse (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). Different "blogospheres" of bloggers do take different shapes, however. Applying network theory to American bloggers who discussed the Iraq War in 2003 and 2004, scholars found that the war blogosphere mapped into two distinct halves based on whether the bloggers were pro- or anti- war (Tremayne et al., 2006). Power laws also applied, with a small number of top blogs gaining the greatest number of incoming links, frequent links to other blogs and frequent original content being the main "predictors" of which blogs would win the greatest number of incoming links and thus web traffic (ibid).

Blogging habits differ from country to country and between different language groups. In countries and regions where speech is relatively restricted and news media are not known for their independence, blogs have the ability to exert greater impact on the public discourse – and are more likely to offer the public alternatives to professional journalism.

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Throughout the Middle East, blogs – in English, Arabic, Persian, and other languages – have fast become a form of alternative press in which people discuss things that are either not welcomed or ignored by the region's official media. Many blogs in the Middle East have become a vehicle for political activism (Lynch, 2007; Haugbolle, 2007; Beckerman, 2007). In China, blogs and other forms of internet discussion have created a new realm for public discourse (Lagerkvist, 2005). However, government censorship has prevented blogs from becoming a fully realized alternative press (MacKinnon, 2008), as will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

So far there has been relatively little network and link-analysis of non-English blogospheres. However, existing studies indicate that power laws tend to apply as soon as a blogosphere reaches a certain size and maturity – as in the case of the fast-growing Spanish blogosphere (Merelo et al., 2004). Some blogospheres are more inclined to interlink with other blogospheres, while others such as the Polish blogosphere have been quite insular (Trammell et al., 2006). It has also been pointed out that despite hope that the Internet would create a more egalitarian and global conversation, the American blogosphere has been even less inclined to link to blogs from the developing world than the U.S. media – other than places such as Iraq which dominate U.S. headlines (Zuckerman, 2005).

The reality of the transnational blogosphere indeed reflects a chronic problem in global information flows. Imbalances and perceived biases of global media – largely dominated by U.S. and British news organizations and news agencies – have been the subject of strong critique for decades. Problems outlined in the seminal study, "The Structure of Foreign News," by Galtung and Ruge (1965) continue to be raised by

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scholars, diplomats, and policymakers: The direction of global information flows heavily favors the developed West, emphasizes "elite" nations and peoples at the expense of non-elites; prefers negative foreign events as more newsworthy than positive ones; provides insufficient historical background and cultural context; and displays a chronic failure to consistently follow many stories over long periods of time (ibid). Adding to these concerns, scholars and policymakers have argued that these problems are exacerbated when news is treated like a commodity rather than an information resource for the global community (MacBride, 1980; Mowlana 1985). The work of correspondents for a handful of Western news agencies is re-printed and re-broadcast by most of the world's local and national newspapers and broadcasters who cannot afford their own foreign bureaus. As a result, as one concerned scholar described it, "the everyday representation of the world via news media is far from a direct reflection of global realities" (Wu, 1998). Research to date indicates that professional journalism's move from print and broadcast to the Internet – in and of itself – did not change the basic patterns and structures of conventional news gatekeeping (Cassidy, 2006).

Enter the phenomenon of "bridge bloggers:" people who blog about what is happening in their country – or the country they're currently living in – for a broader global audience. The media world first awakened to the global power of first-hand, personal accounts written by non-journalists when a young Iraqi architect using the pen name "Salam Pax" captivated readers around the world with his personal accounts in English of what it was like to live through the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The term "bridge blog" was coined by Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan in 2004 to describe an emerging group of bloggers whose blogs act as "bridges" between their home country

and a wider global audience. He himself began blogging in 2002, summarizing in English what Iranian bloggers were writing in Persian.   Since then, tens of thousands of people around the world have emerged as "bridge bloggers" (Zuckerman, 2008).

## Problems and Challenges of China Correspondence

Between the 1949 Communist revolution and the late 1970s, very few journalists from non-Soviet Bloc countries had access to China. A few Western European and Japanese news bureaus were allowed to open in the early-mid 1970s, but until the U.S. and China normalized relations in 1979, the U.S. media's China coverage was conducted largely from the then-British colony of Hong Kong. The number of China-based foreign correspondents grew rapidly in the 1980's and 90's, and by January 2007, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, there were more than 400 foreign correspondents accredited officially to cover China, plus an unknown number who were doing so more informally. The growth in number of foreign correspondents based in China highlights the importance of China to news organizations, at a time when most U.S. news organizations in particular have drastically reduced the number of foreign correspondents stationed abroad (Carroll, 2006).

Despite some loosening of Chinese government restrictions and a lessening of direct harassment of foreign reporters, Western reporters in China continue to operate within a system which, as described by longtime China correspondent Jonathan Mirsky, "which suspects and hinders their work" (1999, p. 2).  Foreign journalists operate in China under an array of restrictions and regulations: the coveted "J" visa for journalists is difficult to obtain. Properly accredited journalists are subject to a long list of rules that are

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applied inconsistently and arbitrarily. Most foreign correspondents are based in Beijing, with a much smaller but growing number in Shanghai. Until January 1st, 2007, official regulations required that journalists obtain official permission before traveling to other cities and provinces (Lim & Blanchard, 2007). This situation, combined with the fact that China is geographically as large as the United States, has made it difficult for a news organization with one or two correspondents based in Beijing or Shanghai to keep abreast of events across China (Petersen, 2007). Thus, the monitoring of all available media sources is critical for foreign news organizations in their efforts to keep abreast of events in such a vast, rapidly-changing, and geopolitically important country. Sources include the official Xinhua News Agency, official Chinese media, overseas news agencies and all other overseas media, overseas dissident websites, as well as commercial and non-commercial Internet sources.

The job of China correspondent is even more difficult because the Chinese press is prevented by government authorities from reporting many stories of unrest and disaster altogether. The situation is also exacerbated by a Chinese government regulation forbidding Chinese nationals from working as bylined correspondents for foreign news organizations or from receiving official "foreign journalist" press credentials. As a result, all China correspondents are foreign nationals, and while a growing proportion do speak and read at least some Chinese, the vast majority rely heavily on Chinese staff relegated by Chinese government regulation to support roles. Unfortunately, Chinese staff of foreign news bureaus are on occasion tried and sentenced on charges of "revealing state secrets" or for other ostensible offences – a consequence of being overly helpful to their

employers on politically sensitive stories (BBC, 2006). All of these factors combine to make China one of the most challenging beats in the world.

How successfully have China correspondents met these challenges? China coverage by the global English-language media in general – and American news organizations' coverage in particular – has been accused of bias and over-simplification, not only by Chinese elites but also by Western scholars and individual China correspondents. A conference on U.S. media coverage of China convened by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations in 1998 sought to examine the problem: "Chinese at all levels of the government and private sectors believe that American press coverage of their country is not balanced and thus unfair" (Lawson, 1998, p.3). Individual China correspondents have also complained in interviews that while there is a great deal of nuanced coverage about China, particularly in the print media and on public radio, it is often drowned out by the more sensational "black and white" stories on television and other mass media outlets (Witt, 2005).

Research on U.S. media's China coverage has produced different results. A content analysis of U.S. "prestige media" in the decade after the end of the Cold War points to coverage that is more independent, varied, and less ideologically driven than in previous decades (Goodman, 1999). Another analysis of China coverage by the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* from 1992-2001 found that while China stories had increased in volume, the "overall tone of the stories on China remains consistently negative across time." (Peng, 2004, p.64). To blame the situation on ideology, however, may be an oversimplification. In another study comparing Western English-language media reports about the Chinese and Vietnamese governments' respective handling of the

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SARS crisis, the authors found that Vietnam was given positive play for its competent handling of SARS, as compared to the much more negative coverage of the Chinese government's initially clumsy, secretive, and ham-fisted reaction (Leung & Huang, 2007). Whatever the underlying causes, the perception that the Western English-language media leaves many worthwhile stories about China untold or ignored continues to be a common view, not only amongst Chinese urban elites but also amongst Chinese bloggers and the "bridge-bloggers" who write about China.

## The Advent of the Internet and Chinese Blogs

The advent of the Internet in China – and the emergence by the late 1990s of spaces where Chinese people endeavored to speak candidly (if anonymously) online – was a very welcome development to China correspondents, given the myriad challenges they face in gathering reliable information about what is happening around the country and what the Chinese public really thinks. By 2000, Internet chatrooms had grown sufficiently large and popular that foreign journalists, often encouraged by their local staff, began following and reporting on key online discussions - especially during times of crisis and media crackdowns. Thus, for example, CNN cited Internet chatroom sentiment as one example of how parts of the Chinese public felt that the Chinese government had not taken a sufficiently hard line toward the U.S. during the 2001 "spy plane crisis" (CNN, 2001). During the SARS outbreak, rumors swirling around Chinese chatrooms were constantly monitored by journalists; while information was not directly reported from the Internet until and unless it could be independently verified, chatroom rumors were often cited as examples of misinformation floating around in absence of

facts (Beech, 2003). Sometimes, whole articles have been based around comments from Chinese Internet chatrooms about events not witnessed by any foreign journalists. (Cheung & Cui, 2004).

The Chinese blogosphere grew from a mere handful of sites in 2002 to at least 20 million blogs by the end of 2006, although the exact number of bloggers in China has always been a matter of dispute (Agence France Presse, 2006; Corner, 2006). Due to Chinese government censorship and surveillance of the Chinese Internet, the nature of the Chinese blogosphere – and its relationship to government and media – is quite different than in the United States and other Western democracies. As in the West, the majority of Chinese blogs are highly personal and apolitical, with most bloggers being young people who record their social lives, antics of their pets, and so on. Unlike in the West, however, there is no political blogosphere to speak of on the other end (MacKinnon, 2008). Chinese blogs with large readerships tend to be written by cultural celebrities and prominent entrepreneurs (Lu Qiu, 2006).

Several categories of Chinese blogs are proving to be of use to China correspondents: A growing number of Chinese journalists are now blogging – some under their real names and some pseudonymously – and use their blogs to provide a greater variety of information and analysis than they are able to do in their official news outlets. Some Chinese academics have begun to use blogs as a platform to discuss and publicize their research; educators are using blogs to share curriculum and communicate with students; and lawyers are using them to discuss legal cases. Even more significantly, a few Chinese government officials at the local and even national level have begun to blog as a way to improve communication with their constituencies (MacKinnon, 2008).

A courageous few – usually family members of people who have been arrested or detained and other victims of human rights abuses – have turned to blogs in order to publicize the human rights violations that they or their loved ones have experienced, and to appeal for justice. With the exception of this final category of people who are willing to take substantial risks to speak out, Chinese bloggers generally do not express overt political opinions. Many of the popular bloggers who write in a journalistic or literary vein for large audiences (i.e., thousands or more), engage instead in irony, parody, and innuendo, enabling informed readers to "read between the lines" about the bloggers' real point (Esraey & Xiao, 2006).

It is important to emphasize that for discussion of politically sensitive topics on the Chinese Internet, online forums, chatrooms or "bulletin board systems" (known commonly as BBS) are the preferred sphere for public discourse. Chinese BBS forums have been popular since the late 90s, well before blogs emerged, and quickly formed cohesive virtual communities (Yang, 2003). It is well documented that Chinese government officials pay attention to BBS buzz on certain issues, and have taken netizen sentiment into account when formulating responses to crises such as the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 U.S. "spy plane" crisis (Xu, 2007). One reason for the medium's continued popularity as a vehicle for exchanging information and expressing opinions online is the "flatness" of the medium, in which many hundreds or thousands of people contribute to conversation threads, as opposed to blogs which represent one person's individual voice or the voice of a small handful of authors. This enables anonymity which many Chinese "netizens" find less politically risky, given that China currently has the world's greatest number of incarcerated Internet writers. In 2006

and 2007, several incidents which became significant national news stories started as posts in a BBS which created sufficient buzz – and were not so politically sensitive as to require censorship – for journalists with professional news outlets to pick them up. There are also a number of cases in which journalists have posted stories or even their raw notes onto BBS's after their editors canned or severely curtailed the story (Soong 2005a; 2005b). These issues are then sometimes picked up by Chinese bloggers as well, but more importantly they are tracked, linked, and sometimes translated by certain English-language "bridge bloggers".

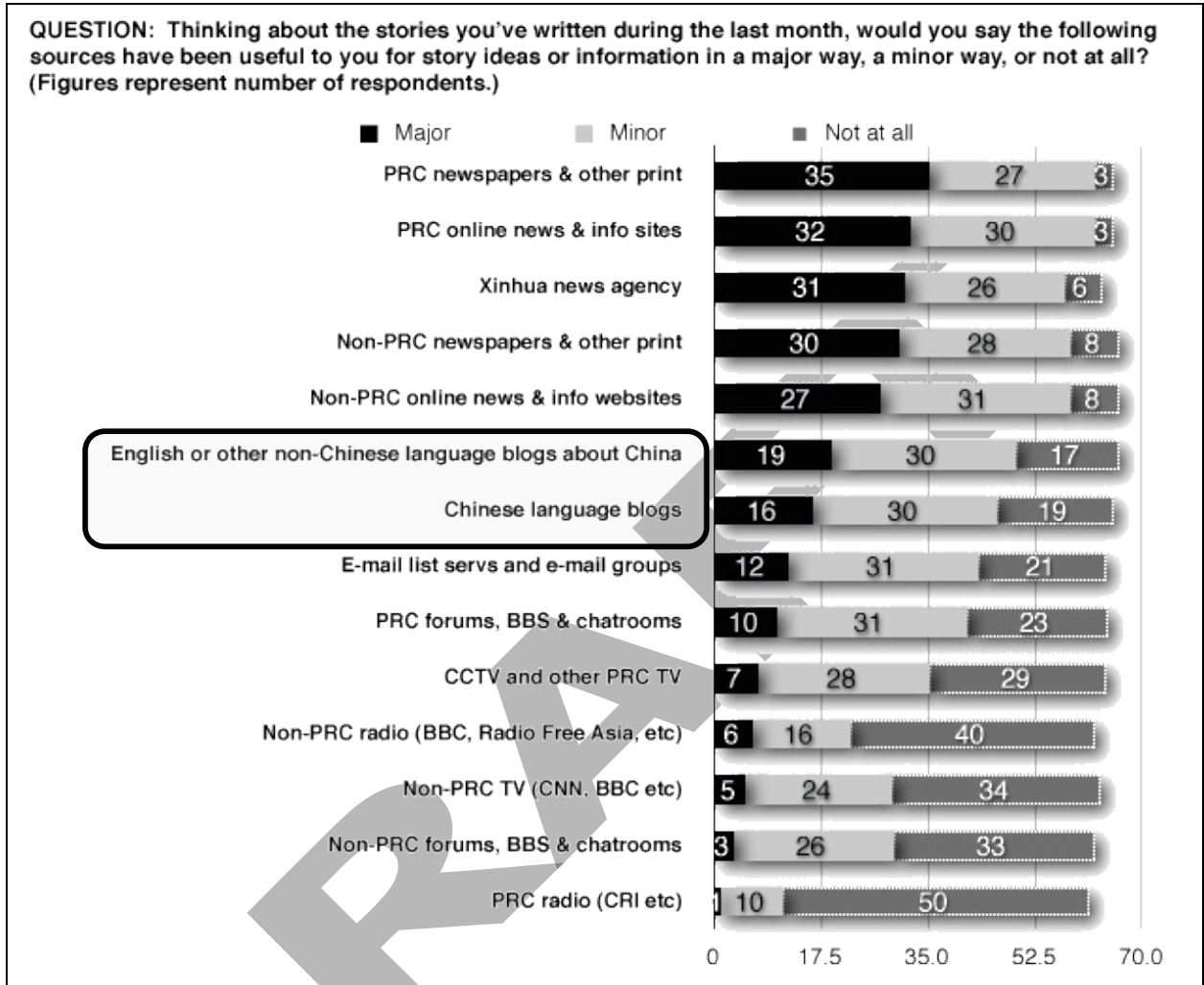## China Correspondents and Bridge Blogs

In order to gain preliminary insight about the extent to which blogs are impacting the work of China correspondents, a small-scale survey was conducted between November 15 and December 11, 2006. Officers of the Foreign Correspondents' clubs in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing posted a link to the online survey on their club websites and sent e-mails to members inviting them to participate. At the time, the total membership of the Foreign Correspondents' Club in China was roughly 160. 72 verified foreign correspondents took the time to complete at least 30 questions in the questionnaire. Although the sampling procedure was non-probability due to the common constraints of email survey, the response rate was relatively high and the respondents included reporters and bureau chiefs from major international news organizations including Reuters, Associated Press, the *Washington Post,* the *Wall Street Journal,* the *Guardian, Financial Times, Straits Times,* Al Jazeera, *Frankfurter Rundschau,* and others. They represented a

wide range of news organizations headquartered in the U.S., U.K., Singapore, Russia, Qatar, Poland, Italy, Hong Kong, Germany, France, Finland, Canada, and Australia.

**The Usage and Impact of Blogs**

Blogs are now a regular resource for China correspondents, and are found to be more useful than seven other categories of media for researching story ideas. Ninety percent of respondents reported that they or their staff read blogs for work purposes. Journalists were then asked: "Thinking about the stories you've written during the last month, would you say the following sources have been useful to you for story ideas or information in a major way, a minor way, or not at all?" A range of options were provided (see Figure 1). "English or other non-Chinese language blogs about China" rated sixth in terms of "major" or "minor" usefulness. This was followed immediately by "Chinese language blogs." A majority of responding China correspondents not only find blogs useful for their stories, but more useful to them than CCTV (Chinese Central Television), CNN, BBC (radio & TV), overseas forums, domestic forums and BBS (online bulletin boards), or Chinese radio.

**Figure 1      The usefulness of blogs for foreign correspondents in China**



QUESTION: Thinking about the stories you've written during the last month, would you say the following sources have been useful to you for story ideas or information in a major way, a minor way, or not at all? (Figures represent number of respondents.)

Legend: ■ Major   ▨ Minor   ■ Not at all

| Source | Major | Minor | Not at all |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| PRC newspapers & other print | 35 | 27 | 3 |
| PRC online news & info sites | 32 | 30 | 3 |
| Xinhua news agency | 31 | 26 | 6 |
| Non-PRC newspapers & other print | 30 | 28 | 8 |
| Non-PRC online news & info websites | 27 | 31 | 8 |
| English or other non-Chinese language blogs about China | 19 | 30 | 17 |
| Chinese language blogs | 16 | 30 | 19 |
| E-mail list servs and e-mail groups | 12 | 31 | 21 |
| PRC forums, BBS & chatrooms | 10 | 31 | 23 |
| CCTV and other PRC TV | 7 | 28 | 29 |
| Non-PRC radio (BBC, Radio Free Asia, etc) | 6 | 16 | 40 |
| Non-PRC TV (CNN, BBC etc) | 5 | 24 | 34 |
| Non-PRC forums, BBS & chatrooms | 3 | 26 | 33 |
| PRC radio (CRI etc) | 1 | 10 | 50 |

In a follow-up question about BBS use, respondents on the whole found blogs to be somewhat more useful than bulletin boards and online forums. But the different spheres are utilized for different purposes: "Blogs tend to give you story ideas, angles and leads, as well as links to relevant BBS sites," wrote one reporter. "BBS is more useful to gauge public opinions on major events."

Most respondents believe that blogs have alerted them to stories they might otherwise not have known about. Journalists frequently contact bloggers as sources for stories. In response to the question: "What kind of impact have blogs had on the way you cover

China?" 10% chose "A huge impact;" 51% chose "a moderate impact;" 37% chose "a slight impact;" only one respondent selected "No impact at all." In response to "Have you ever done a story you would not have known about if you or your staff hadn't seen it on a blog?" 74% selected "sometimes" while 6% answered "often". Together, this 80% of respondents included journalists from Reuters, AP, the *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, The *Times* of London, National Public Radio, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the *South China Morning Post*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and many other news organizations whose China reporting has an impact on the way in which non-Chinese publics, policymakers, and financial markets perceive China. One British journalist wrote: "It has changed the way I work. Partly because of blogging, I am trying to move away from writing shorter pieces so that I can concentrate on more value-added stories, which involve lengthy interviews and trips." 66% of respondents claimed to have contacted a blogger at least once in the past three months in order to follow up on something the blogger had written for a possible story.

China correspondents appear to find blogs useful to spot emerging stories and as a general source of story ideas. Responding to the question "In what way do you find blogs useful?" top choices selected by at least 20 people were (in order of popularity):

"A way to find out about emerging stories sooner than I would otherwise"

"As a general source of story ideas"

"As a source of information that I can't find elsewhere"

"As a gauge of China's popular culture 'pulse'"

"To locate interesting people to interview"

"As a gauge of the sentiments of China's people on various issues"

"Because I want to know what certain bloggers have to say on a topic"

Most respondents found it impossible to answer the question of whether blogs in general are more or less "reliable" compared to other media they follow. One journalist wrote "Blogs as well as official media can also be unreliable and not trustworthy sources. It really depends." Another agreed: "The information in Chinese blogs, like the information purveyed in much [Chinese] state media, needs to be double-checked for accuracy. The utility of blogs lies in their indication of popular interest in a subject, or interested or informed opinion on a matter." Another newswire reporter wrote that he uses blogs "to see what stories to avoid putting too much focus and resources on, as they are obviously quite widespread if they are being blogged about. There is the occasional aberration to that, of course."

**Prominent Bridge Bloggers and Their Influence**

Nearly three times as many questionnaire respondents claimed to be following English-language blogs on a daily basis than follow Chinese-language blogs every day. More than half said they do not read Chinese-language blogs themselves, but rather ask their staff to read them for story research purposes. This suggests that English-language "bridge blogs" about China have greater direct influence on China correspondents than Chinese-language blogs. In late 2006 two particular blogs, *EastSouthWestNorth* (abbreviated as ESWN) and *Danwei.org*, appeared to be substantially more important to respondents than other English-language China-focused blogs.

Respondents were asked: "Specifically, how often do you read the following China-focused English-language blogs?" A list of choices was presented, compiled by

consulting a number of China-based journalists and asking them which blogs they follow regularly. Only two bridge blogs on the list had been read at some point by at least 80% of respondents: *ESWN*, authored by Hong Kong-based media analyst Roland Soong, and *Danwei.org*, run by Beijing-based media entrepreneur Jeremy Goldkorn.

Why were *ESWN* and *Danwei* so widely read by China correspondents? As one respondent wrote: "*ESWN* is so much more important than other blogs that it almost deserves a category by itself". No other blog comes as close to serving as a bridge between Mandarin and English media." By the end of 2005 *ESWN* was receiving 12,000 unique visitors per day. Soong had become influential enough in China-focused academic and media circles that several profiles have been written about him in Western media, and he was invited to speak about Chinese blogs and Internet discourse at academic and industry conferences (West, 2005; Ruwitch, 2006). Soong scours the Chinese-language Internet for postings on Chinese-language blogs and BBS chatrooms that might help outsiders understand what is happening in China, as well as articles in the Chinese-language media containing information and insights not readily available in English. A semi-retired 'news junkie' who worked many years for a media research company, his work on *ESWN* is uncompensated and he runs no advertisements. At the 2006 Chinese Internet Research Conference, Soong explained how he uses his blog to bridge between the "two different worlds" of English-language news and Chinese-language news. He pointed out that for many reasons the English-language international media covers China in less detail than the Chinese-language media (including media from Hong Kong and Taiwan who report under much freer conditions). Much of the China news in English is delayed, and Western journalists tend to have different perspectives on news events in

China than Chinese journalists. His goal is not to replace the English-language mainstream media but rather to supplement it, and specifically: "(1) to make a difference in specific cases and (2) to create an awareness that things may be more complex than it seems." (Soong, 2006d) He writes that he does not claim to be a definitive "source" of anything; rather he recommends that his readers approach him as a "hotline tipster" (Soong, 2006e).

Soong's blog provided the first English-language reports on a number of stories emerging from the Chinese Internet. Examples he cites include a 2005 bus explosion in the city of Fuzhou, reports of which first appeared on the Chinese Internet thanks to cameraphone photos and messages from people on the scene; and a translation of the first report emerging on from the Chinese-language Internet via bystander text message that a British journalist and his local guide had been attacked by thugs on their way to a village beset by unrest (Soong 2005c). In other cases, Soong provided thorough documentation of events in China which the English-language media had covered more superficially or sporadically, such as the long-running series of events surrounding local elections and efforts to recall the mayor of Taishi village, Guangzhou province. (Soong, 2006d; 2005c) Another story Soong documented in detail was the lawsuit against two Chinese reporters by iPod subcontractor Foxconn (a Taiwanese company), and the outcry in the Chinese media that eventually caused Foxconn to withdraw its suit (2006a). Soong admits to have used his research and translation skills to "lobby, persuade and bully the western media to pick up the story" (Soong, 2006b).

One news agency reporter is grateful that Soong offers "short-cuts" for the journalist's story research: "If *ESWN* picks up an interesting article in Nanfang Zhoumo

(i.e., *Southern Weekend),* I'll make a point to find the paper and look at the coverage myself. But I likely would not have found the article on my own without being tipped off by the blog." Another journalist wrote: "I look at Roland Soong to see what's cooking in all sorts of spheres that I would never see otherwise. It's a virtual news tip sheet. Some of it is translation, so reliability may be a big question. But Roland does a huge service by bringing it to our attention."

The other bridge blog most frequently cited by respondents was *Danwei.org*. One journalist wrote that she finds *Danwei* particularly useful because it follows Chinese media regulations very closely and links to original regulations. Launched in 2003 by the Beijing-based media consultant Jeremy Goldkorn, Danwei.org is written by a small group of regular contributors – all Chinese-speaking Beijing-based expatriates – supplemented by occasional guest contributors including "journalists, scholars and people with expertise in Chinese business, media and culture." The *Danwei* team posts daily information about new developments in Chinese media and technology, and tends to be fast in reporting on new regulations, with links to the original text of the regulations when available (e.g., Goldkorn, 2006d; 2006e) Like *ESWN*, *Danwei* provides translations from Chinese media and blogs on subjects deemed to be of interest to the website's readers (e.g., Martinsen, 2006).

*Danwei* also serves as a media watchdog over both Chinese and Western media. Goldkorn pulls no punches in pointing out fabrications and propaganda in the Chinese media as well as errors and over-simplifications in Western press coverage of China. His blog article postings include headlines such as: "It's difficult to see Beijing clearly from Manhattan" (a critique of a *New York Times* story and Western blogger reactions to it)

(2005), "Sensationalist headlines at the *Wall Street Journal*: Foreign magazines in China" (2006b) "China loosens TV regulations; Reuters calls it censorship" (2006c), and "Nonsense journalism in *The Spectator*," in which he critiques an article about petitioners in Beijing which, he argues, "does nothing to address the legitimate grievances of petitioners. It is activist journalism at its shoddiest" (2007).

One example of how *ESWN* and *Danwei* have managed occasionally to lead international news coverage on certain stories is the case of a copyright suit by the Chinese newspaper *Beijing News* against the Hong Kong-based online news portal Tom.com. A story about the lawsuit first appeared in *Southern Weekend* on December 21st. Roland Soong translated the story on *ESWN* on December 24th (2006c). *Danwei* then quoted from Soong's translation and added more analysis and links to further resources on the same day (Goldkorn 2006d). On January 3rd, the story was reported in the *International Herald Tribune* (French, 2007).

Both Soong and Goldkorn were media professionals before they started blogging. They both have a strong feel for the interests of professional journalists, how they work, and what they are likely to know and not know. Journalists who follow their blogs know who they are and respect their credibility. Their blogs go beyond personal opinion essay-writing in reaction to news events and are full of elements journalists find valuable: original information not available elsewhere; in-depth perspective based on specialized knowledge; information or insight on places and people the journalist cannot easily access; links to original documents and resources; translated items from the original language on subjects that journalists are likely to find newsworthy, or useful background material for stories.

## Lessons Learned about Global Information Flows

This paper explores the evolving relationship between blogs and China correspondence in a global and historical media context by examining existing literature, utilizing many years of professional observations by the author, and drawing on the survey of China correspondents conducted in late 2006. In so doing, I have outlined how the Internet in China is a potentially alternative public sphere that provides new sources of information, analysis, and story ideas for China correspondents, which is particularly valuable given the unique working conditions and challenges faced by foreign journalists covering China.

However, this article also demonstrates that the new Web2.0-powered global information order is not necessarily as flat as many idealists had hoped. A Chinese person may dislike how the international media portrays his or her country and may decide to take matters into her own hands by speaking directly to the world and starting a blog. But there are many obstacles to that voice actually being heard by enough people such that it can make a dfference in global perceptions of China. The most obvious obstacle is language, but even in fluent English, the blog faces many more obstacles if it hopes to gain an audience of any meaningful size or seeks to influence the coverage of the media the blog finds inadequate or biased. It takes a certain kind of person – such as bilingual "bridge bloggers" – with some professional credentials, ability to access or locate original information of interest to broader audiences, and a sophisticated understanding of how media works.

In the Chinese case, a small handful of bridge bloggers have emerged to serve as gatekeepers, introducing new information, perspectives and ideas from the larger Chinese

blogosphere to the interpretive community of China correspondents. In late 2006 the two most powerful were Jeremy Goldkorn's *Danwei* and Roland Soong's *EastSouthWestNorth*. One cannot say that the individual Chinese blogger makes no difference: they make a difference when a particular Chinese blogger publishes information not found elsewhere. Neither can one safely assert that when a certain subject is extremely "hot" in the Chinese blogosphere foreign correspondents might not find it more worthy of attention. But as China correspondents attempt to keep track of this vast conversation, place this array of facts and opinions generated by Chinese blogs into meaningful context, and figure out what constitutes a "story," the bridge bloggers provide an invaluable service to journalists – and by doing so exert an influence on information flows between China and the rest of the world that is exponentially more powerful than the average Chinese blogger.

While utopian hopes for an egalitarian global public sphere may not be playing out exactly as hoped, one can still legitimately argue that the global public sphere is becoming more democratic – and more open to participation by more kinds of people – than in the pre-Internet era. But it is not a pure democracy. Rather, the global information order appears to be evolving more along the lines of representative democracy. Except that the "representatives" are not elected, but simply emerge as popular and powerful as in the cases of the bridge bloggers. Thus, if we truly hope that the Internet will enable media – both citizen and professional – to do a better job of serving all members of the global community, we first need to examine more closely who the emerging "representatives" are, what "constituencies" they have come to represent, and why.

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