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Blogging the Gap: A survey of China bloggers

Kerry Arnot

MSc in Global Media and Communications

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Blogging the Gap: A survey of China bloggers

Kerry Arnot

ABSTRACT

In academic literature as well as media reports, there are seemingly endless hopes and claims about the promise of blogs and their potential as a form of communication that can revolutionize the way we relate to the *other*. This is particularly evident in the case of China. Some media scholars point to the failure of mainstream media to facilitate this understanding, while hailing the triumph of citizen journalism (e.g., Rodriguez 2001 and Nip 2009). Others, particularly those interested in China, focus on the increase in popularity and participation in online chat forums as a positive step towards a thriving participatory culture (e.g., Herold 2008). A few have turned their gaze to a specific type of blog, the bridge blog, which translates content from the language of one blogosphere into the language of another (e.g., Zuckerman 2008 And MacKinnon 2007, 2008).

In the ensuing investigation, through semi-structured interviews with China bloggers¹ I will attempt to uncover their motivations for writing, their attitudes toward their readers, and the overall implications for blogs as a tool of transnational communication. I will employ several critiques of the Habermasian public sphere, namely John Keane's (2000) *micro public sphere* and Guobin Yang's (2003) *transnational cultural Chinese public sphere*.

Finally, I offer the suggestion that absolutist theories are ill-suited to studying blogs, the democratizing potential of the Internet, and hints of political reform in China. Instead I propose that China blogs, especially China bridge blogs deserve a unique and nuanced theoretical exploration. When they are viewed through a flexible theoretical lens I further suggest that China blogs are a vital part of an emerging *transnational micro public sphere*, and are playing a valuable role in countering Western media discourse on China.

¹ I have borrowed the terms China blog and China blogger from various studies (Tang 2008, MacKinnon 2007, 2008) as well as from the bloggers themselves (Sinica podcast 2010).

INTRODUCTION

The first documented observation of China through the eyes of a Westerner was from Marco Polo in the 13th century. Polo embarked on what today could still be considered an epic journey from Europe, through the Middle East and Central Asia, and finally through Mongolia and most of China (Latham, 2004). Polo recorded everything he observed providing the Christian West with one of its first glimpses of far-off China. Though silk and other goods were traded between China and Europe for centuries, implying something of an economic relationship, little was known or understood of Chinese culture in the West (Latham 2004: 8).

Today, there are unfortunately remarkable similarities: western countries enjoy a fairly robust economic relationship with China, but the mainstream mediated socio-cultural relationship is far from dynamic or edifying (Ng 2009). This is influenced by several positive and negative factors. On the downside, Chinese government media censorship, coupled with limited coverage by western media (MacKinnon 2008), mean that western audiences may consume a reduced or even skewed vision of China. On the up-side, the Great Firewall is not fail-safe and censorship is actually quite random and unevenly applied, western media outlets may be improving their coverage of China, and there are thriving Chinese language and English language blogospheres which provide a counter narrative and in some cases even work together (Kuo, Goldkorn, and Moss 2010). This unofficial discourse yields a much more varied and textured portrayal of China which may very well improve cultural understanding in the future, and for now at least provides an outlet for expression beyond the mainstream media.

This study will explore one aspect of this multi-layered relationship: the perspective of China bloggers. Through semi-structured interviews, I will attempt to answer several questions in this study: How do China bloggers assess the impact of their work in the context of an emerging online transnational micro public sphere, and in the context of official media discourse on China? What are their motivations for writing? What are their attitudes toward their writing, their audience, and their perceived place in the China blogosphere? What are their strategies of interaction with readers and other bloggers? How are these strategies of interaction informed?

The theoretical underpinnings of this exploration come from diverse traditions including public sphere theory and alternative media studies from Western and Chinese perspectives.

While there is some academic research on China blogs, a bit more on blogs in general, and even more research on public sphere and internet communication both in China and in the West, there is very little on the perspectives and attitudes of China bloggers themselves. China bloggers have varied and rich personal and professional experience relating to China and are part of a small-scale movement that could fill large gaps in understanding by acting as “cultural diplomats.” As Reese and Dai conclude in their musings on citizen journalism in China, government control of the Internet does not equal a lack of meaningful, progressive activity but these require a proper analytical framework (2009: 221). The following chapters attempt to provide that framework and justify the importance of China blogs as an area for further academic inquiry.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER: RESEARCHING BLOGS AND BLOGGER MOTIVATIONS

The first blog, as well as the term weblog both date back to 1997 (Zuckerman 2008). Since then their popularity has exploded, and according to Blog Pulse (2010), a branch of Nielsen Media Research, there are currently more than 140 million blogs worldwide on a variety of subjects ranging from politics to fashion, cooking, and gossip. Blogs are the “fastest-growing medium of personal publishing and the newest method of individual expression and opinion on the Internet” (ibid). The pace of academic research on blogs is glacial, especially when compared with the exponential growth of the blogosphere, and there are still an infinite number of areas to explore.

The first academic article on blogs was “Blog This” by Henry Jenkins who observed, “We’re in a lull between waves of digital-media commercialization, and bloggers are seizing the moment - potentially increasing cultural diversity and lowering barriers to cultural participation”(2002). A number of scholars have since published studies on blogging; notable among these is, “Why we blog” which reveals five main reasons: blogging to document one’s life, blogging as commentary, blogging as catharsis, blogging as a muse, and blogging as a community forum (Nardi, et al 2004). Additionally, the authors conclude that most bloggers, even those who write diary-style blogs are “acutely aware of their readers...calibrating what they should and should not reveal” (2004: 42-43). However, they also note that despite this awareness of readers, “As with other electronic media, blogs in themselves are not sufficient for building a community“ (45).

Though eight years have elapsed since “Blog This,” Jenkins’ words still identify a key area of study for the impact and implication of blogging, which is the impact on democratic processes that an increase in participation could bring about. Whether or not blogs, due to their low-entry threshold, their low-cost, and their abundance will lead to a more thriving participant culture or even healthier democracies remains a key point of tension among academics. This mirrors the general debate on whether or not the Internet is useful for enhancing public participation and contributing meaningfully to a functioning democracy. On one side of the argument are scholars who hail the potential of the Internet to spur an increased participation in public life (Keane 2000, Mortensen and Walker 2002, Scott and Street 2000, Castells 2007), and on the other side are those who argue that Internet-mediated communication is not only unhelpful but actually harmful to democracy because it fragments the public into increasingly smaller spheres of interaction, leads to isolated and anonymous participation, and ultimately decreases the level and quality of participation in public life (Katz 1996, Poster 1995, Gitlin 1998, Putnam 2000, Dean 2001, Mouffe as interviewed in Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006). Determining who is on what side of this constantly shifting divide is made more difficult by the number of scholars who take a third way, and attempting to point out the benefits and shortcomings of blogging and the Internet, and attempt to offer their own view of how basic political theories of the public sphere and civil society might best fit computer-mediated communication and its effect on democracy (Buchstein 1997; Bailey, Carpentier, and Cammaerts 2008).

Civil Society and Public Sphere: The Western Tradition

The concepts of public sphere and civil society, while distinct, are used by theorists rather interchangeably in attempts to conceptualize public life. While this project will look primarily at the public sphere and its derivatives, it is important to first discuss the concept in the context of civil society. There are a number of similarities, beginning of course with the fact that both describe public interaction, which is separate from private interests and state interests. While the state may provide the means necessary for a public sphere or civil society to emerge, both may be mildly confrontational or antithetical to the objectives of the state (e.g. Dean 2001). Both concepts have a background in Greek political philosophy (Cohen and Arato 1994, Tai 2006).

Where the two concepts separate is also a matter of contention among theorists, as is their applicability to various aspects of modern public life. Perhaps the main distinction is the emphasis for some on institutional and organizational structure in civil society (e.g., Putnam 2000) and for others on agonism (Cohen and Arato quoted in Dean 2001), while normatively

speaking, the public sphere is a reasoned debate between any number of individuals committed to the common good in a formal or informal public setting where the end objective is consensus (Habermas 1974). The benchmark against which the majority of current scholarship reacts is the Habermasian public sphere. Habermas's description is of a bourgeois public sphere set in Enlightenment-era salons and coffee shops where citizens, judged only on the merits of their argument, came together to discuss matters of communal importance (ibid). Subsequent theorists have slowly pulled apart this original concept on several accounts. Feminist scholars have argued that the Habermasian public sphere presupposes equal access to the debate and that the Enlightenment era salons and coffee shops in historical reality were only open to men of a certain class (e.g., Mouffe 2001). Chantal Mouffe, in particular has argued that Habermas emphasized the notion of reason as a pre-requisite for participation in the public sphere and that this is against the true nature of political participation (2001). Still others have argued that in de-emphasizing conflict, the Habermasian concept is utterly unsuitable to political life (Dean 2001, 2003).

Public Sphere in a Globalized, Networked Age

A strand of theorists has addressed conceptual shortcomings of the public sphere by attacking the singular aspect of the Habermasian construct. This includes John Keane's (2000) concept of *micro, meso, and macro public spheres* and Todd Gitlin's (1998) notion of many small public spheres or "sphericules." Considering the potential of smaller public spheres is useful, but the lack of specifics in Gitlin's theory is unhelpful. Keane's concept is not only more detailed but may have much more to offer especially when considering new media, networked communication, and an international scope.

Keane echoes the view of a number of theorists in this area of multiple public spheres: "The ideal of a unified public sphere and its corresponding vision of a territorially bounded republic of citizens striving to live up to their definition of the public good are obsolete" (2000: 76). He acknowledges both civil dialogue as well as passionate debate and the role of media in linking the participants which can be two or more people engaged in "a particular type of spatial relationship...in which non-violent controversies erupt...concerning the power relations operating within their given milieu of interaction" (77).

He re-envision the public sphere in inter-related levels of public engagement and interaction and describes the extent to which each is related to media usage. The first, which he terms *micro public spheres*, can consist of "dozens, hundreds, or thousands of disputants interacting at the same sub-nation state level" (77). *Micro public spheres* may make a *macro-*

level appearance (e.g. At protests) but their power and influence are mostly latent (78). *Meso and macro public spheres* are larger in both size and scope ranging from hundreds of thousands or millions of participants. *Meso public spheres* are perhaps the most recognizable version and in relation to media consumption may overlap with *micro public spheres*, for example when readers of national newspapers consult and consume alternative media publications (80).

Another critique of the public sphere involves evaluating the impact of globalization on the boundary of national politics, combined with the impact of network communications (Sassi 2000, Volkmer 2003, Castells 2008). As Ulrich Beck has argued “The structure of opportunities for political action is no longer defined by the national/international dualism but is now located in the ‘global arena” (2006: 249). Conceptually speaking, the global public sphere is very promising; however, most global public sphere theorists emphasize large-scale mainstream media-driven action, or the globalization of news (Volkmer 2003) instead of small-scale micro sphere citizen media-led movements. For this study, and its focus on a small number of bloggers in one corner of the blogosphere, it is unsuitable.

Clemencia Rodriguez’s (2001) concept of citizens’ media is a key theoretical element when describing the impact of small social movements, especially when considering the power dynamic present in the alternative media-mainstream media dialectic. As she notes, alternative media theory of the mid to late 1980s conceived of power as a binary; there were powerful mainstream publications and powerless alternative publications (11). As Rodriguez argues, the use of the term *alternative* always defines these publications, or radio stations, or blogs as alternative to something. They are defined as what they are not, instead of what they are. She proposes using the term “citizens’ media” because it contextualizes smaller-scale media efforts in the scope of those who are creating and distributing them: the citizens.

Civil Society and Public Sphere in China

As a concept, civil society enjoyed a revival in the 1980s with the break-up of the former Soviet Union and the subsequent wave of democracy movements coupled with economic reform in Eastern Europe (Tai 2006). Naturally, China-watchers dreamed that China would undergo democratic reforms, especially since the economic reforms were already evident. Despite the fact that “the most fertile ground for the development of the theory of civil society has been cast in Western democracies,” and that “scholars have noted the problematics associated with the applicability of the idea of civil society in other parts of the world under vastly different conditions” (Tai 2006: 27), there are still countless attempts at theorizing

Chinese civil society. Beginning with post-Mao economic reforms and following with China normalizing relations with the West in the late 1970s, scholars have eagerly watched for signs that a civil society was forming. The climax of this hopeful outlook was the Tiananmen Square incident of June 4, 1989 (Tai 2006: 48). Tentative celebrations were obviously brief and the failure of the movement sparked reactions that either China was sufficiently lacking in infrastructure to support a civil society, while others argue for a different term when attempting to describe the nature of public engagement and dissent (Brodsgaard, Kjeld, and Strand 1998, Brook and Frolic 1997, Hjellum 1998). Torstein Hjellum defends the stance that a participatory culture in China is emerging and deserves scrutiny even if it is not as formalized as civil society scholars would hope (1998).

Zixue Tai, author of *The Internet in China* supports the view, that in order to truly be useful, the concept of civil society needs to be contextualized and historicized, otherwise it is simply an idea (2006: 57). Given the evidence, it is clear that applying the European model of civil society to China is not useful, and furthermore blinds the researcher from discovering counter-culture movements that may make a small impact or a larger gradual change (ibid). A number of scholars, who observe small and slow but meaningful change in China argue that the concepts of civil society and public sphere need to be re-contextualized if they are to be of any theoretical use (Brodsgaard, Kjeld and Strand 1998; Tai 2006). Attempts to conceptualize civil society in China face an inherent linguistic challenge because historically there was no word for society in Chinese (Brodsgaard, Kjeld, and Strand 1998: 10). Life was organized in a top-down hierarchy starting with 天下 “tian xia” *heaven*, then 国 “guo” *country*, 家 “jia” *family*, and finally 身 “shen” *person* (ibid). The most commonly cited word for society is, 社会 “she hui”, which was actually borrowed from Japanese and literally means *ritual community-association* (ibid). The concept of civil society has undergone various transformations, and presently there are a number of versions that loosely mean “civil society” in the western democratic political tradition. The first version, 市民社会 “shi min she hui” translates as *city-people’s society* and appeared in translations of Marx’s *Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (ibid), and other conjugations include 公民社会 “gong min she hui” *citizen’s society*, and 民间社会 “min jian she hui” *civilized society*.

Guobin Yang’s notion of the online transnational Chinese cultural public sphere is also crucial because of the inclusion of non-Chinese “intellectuals (such as teachers and journalists) who try to understand China intellectually and bring their understanding to their own communities” (2003: 470). Yang uses this concept to broaden the field of inquiry on the applicability of the public sphere to China and de-emphasize the dependence of such a public

sphere on a loosening of government censorship. Inherently, the notion of a transnational Chinese cultural public sphere is a reaction to national government constrictions, but by expanding the horizons, Yang provides a promising rubric against which to measure geographically dispersed publics.

Public Sphere and the Internet

This tension between whether or not blogs are considered beneficial or detrimental to democracy seems to hinge primarily on the following issues: the digital divide, the highly private individualistic nature of many blogs, the fragmentation of the public into increasingly smaller and isolated groups of like-minded individuals, the often low-quality discussion and immature “flaming” that prevents civil dialogue, and in some cases governmental regulation which might prohibit free expression. Jodi Dean, author of several unique theoretical pieces on this subject offers that if the Internet is not an appropriate representation of the public sphere, especially due to the often uncivilized or utterly banal discourse that emerges on such online forums, then this highlights a problem with the public sphere as a concept, and not the democratizing potential of the Internet (2001). She proposes a concept of civil society not entirely unlike Mouffe’s concept of agonistic pluralism, which would account for all outlandish and inappropriate online behavior and acknowledge its place in public political life (Mouffe 2001, Dean 2001). This, she argues, is unlikely to happen if we attempt to conceptualize the democratizing promise of the Internet using the public sphere as a framework because the need for rational debate in that model would exclude passionate voice.

While Dean, Mouffe, and others may argue the benefits of agonism, there is a clear distinction between agonism and antagonism as observed by Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier (2008). Where, “antagonism makes debate and thus argumentative confrontation impossible, as in this relationship ‘the other’ needs to be destroyed or at least humiliated. Agonism enables passionate debate to take place, ending with the parties ‘agreeing to disagree’, but at the same time retaining a level of respect for one another and the opposing views” (2008: 106-107). When considering the democratic potential in Internet-mediated communication on a global scale, this notion is particularly important, since the empirical reality that this technology is not available to all nor used by all. Essentially, as Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen note, “Celebratory proclamations about the ‘global village’ engendered by Web 2.0 ring hollow when we are reminded, in turn, that the majority of the world’s population has never made a telephone call, let alone logged on to a computer ” (2009: 7).

The debate on the promise and potential of the Internet is not a new debate in the context of historical claims about new communication technologies. In fact, Samuel Morse was convinced that the telegraph and the trans-Atlantic cable would bring about world peace (Sassi 2000). Proclamations about the democratic potential of the Internet coincide with an observed decrease in public participation (Tai 2006: 177). Internet utopians therefore, seem to be grasping at theoretical straws, but as some scholars have noted, “the ‘technospaces’ appropriated by new media technologies empower users to create dynamic, relevant, contingent, and contested spaces that are redefining the previous concepts of spatiality” (Munt 2001, quoted in Tai 2006: 161). To counter this positivist attitude, others have pointed out that the Internet is still a space which can be colonized by commercial or hegemonic forces (Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006), as well a space that can reinforce “patterns of behavior and the sociopolitical structure of the world” (McChesney 1995, quoted in Tai 2006: 180).

Can the Internet democratize China?

Similar to the debates on the democratizing potential of the Internet and the potential for democracy in China, a robust academic debate centers on whether or not the Internet will bring political reforms to China. The hopefuls hail the popularity of online bulletin board systems and online polls as a good sign (Herold 2008, MacKinnon 2008, Tai 2006), and others argue the Internet provides too many spaces of contestation that the Chinese government cannot possibly patrol (WuDunn 1994: 279). David Herold and others point to the rise of internet vigilantism which manifests itself when Chinese netizens track down those who they feel have committed faux pas or even crimes against China or the Chinese people (2008, Reese and Dai 2009). In the context of rational public sphere or even an agonistic civil society the usefulness of ruthlessly embarrassing and harassing fellow citizens for such things as having an affair, or assisting friends at a pro-Tibet rally overseas is clearly questionable. While there is some evidence to suggest that the Internet is a new space of contestation in China (Herold 2008), the Chinese government is also active online and actually places “netizens” to represent communist party ideals (Nip 2009, China Digital Times 2010). These faux netizens are supposedly paid 50 cents per comment and are thus referred to derisively as members of the “50 cents party” (ibid).

Perhaps wildly searching for signs of democracy is not the only worthwhile pursuit. As alternative media scholar Clemencia Rodriguez states: “instead of thinking of democracy as an ultimate goal a final state-of-things to reach, we should look at how democratic and non-democratic forces are being renegotiated constantly, and how citizen’s media can strengthen

the former” (2001: 22). Her approach to exploring alternative media, though applied to Latin American and Spanish contexts, may be of use when trying to understand the impact of blogging in China especially her call to tackle the investigation from a “dynamic, non-essentialist manner” so that we might detect subtle processes of social change (163).

Researching China Blogs

According to a study, China blogs and bridge blogs in particular have become a useful tool for foreign correspondents covering China (MacKinnon 2008). A bridge blog is one that attempts to bridge the linguistic and cultural span between two blogospheres. The term was coined by Ethan Zuckerman and Chinese blogger Xiao Qiang in October 2004 and popularized by Iranian blogger Hossein Deraskshan and by MacKinnon herself (MacKinnon 2007, Zuckerman 2007). The increased popularity of using China blogs, especially for generating story ideas helps correspondents overcome the challenges of reporting in China (MacKinnon 2008). The implied impact of these blogs on mainstream reporting relate to other observations about citizen journalism: “We used to call mainstream journalism the ‘first draft of history.’ Now I’d argue, much of that first draft is being written by citizen journalists and what they’re telling us is powerful indeed” (Gillmor 2005, quoted in Allan and Thorsen 2009: 13).

The scholarship on China blogs is small, but growing and a notable contribution is Qi Tang’s deconstruction of several China blogs written by American expatriates. Tang used multi-modal discourse analysis to reveal how these blogs represent or misrepresent and *other* Chinese citizens and Chinese culture (2008). Tang argues that China blogs are important because they are platforms for regular citizens to express their opinions and because these blogs are, at least unofficially, sources of information on China for other non-Chinese speaking expatriates (ibid).

Similarly to other statistics about China, Internet usage numbers are huge and rapidly increasing. Interestingly enough, the Chinese public was only allowed on the Internet for the first time in 1997 (Herold 2008). As of June 30 there were 420 million Internet users, which is larger than the entire population of the United States (Buckley 2010, Voice of America 2010, China Internet Network Information Center Statistics 2010, United States Census 2010). According to Chinabloglist.org, started and maintained by Shanghai blogger and linguistic consultant John Pasden, there are at least 538 blogs by expatriates writing about China (Chinabloglist.org). In the context of these numbers alone, China bloggers are writing

about an immensely important country to a globally dispersed audience of at least tens of millions, and should be a key area of inquiry in media studies.

Summary/ Framework

This project will focus on perspectives from one small corner of the global blogosphere and the potential impact that this micro-level public sphere can have on global discourse. In doing so, I will draw on a number of theories outlined in the preceding chapter, namely John Keane's notion of *micro public spheres*, Yang's notion of a *transnational Chinese cultural public sphere* and Clemencia Rodriguez's notion of *citizens' media*. I propose a blending of Keane and Yang's concepts and will consider China blogs using a hybrid term: *transnational micro public sphere*. China blogs, because of the space they occupy between Chinese and Western mainstream media, because of the small differences that they make in western reporting practices (MacKinnon 2008), deserve a specific categorization of their own.

Because of the institutional emphasis in civil society theory, it is ill suited to this study. The public sphere is more useful for studying China blogs, since in some of its conceptions, it can be defined as two people talking about an issue of common concern. Rodriguez's (2001) concept of citizens' media and the disruption to mainstream media discourse it implies will also provide an important theoretical addition to this study. Finally, as academic precedents I will draw mostly from Qi Tang's (2008) study of expatriate blogs, Nardi et, al's (2004) study of bloggers motivations and Rebecca MacKinnon's (2007, 2008) studies on the impact of China blogs.

By synthesizing the literature reviewed, this goal of this project is to address the following questions:

- 1) How do China bloggers assess the impact of their work in the context of an emerging online transnational micro public sphere, and in the context of official media discourse on China?
- 2) What are their motivations for writing? What are their attitudes toward their writing, their audience, and their perceived place in the China blogosphere?
- 3) What are their strategies of interaction with readers and other bloggers? How are these strategies of interaction informed?

METHODOLOGY: WHY DO QUALITATIVE SEMI – STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS?

As numerous researchers have concluded, investigating and writing about China is a massive endeavor. Almost any research method could be applied to a study of China and expatriate blogs and indeed it already has (MacKinnon 2007, 2008; Tang 2008). Since the area of expatriate blogs and indeed bridge blogs or transnational blogs in China remains a dynamic but under-researched area of inquiry, future studies using a variety of methods are essential.

Content or discourse analysis would be useful for deconstructing the blogs at a textual level, but seemed inappropriate for this study since the focus is on bloggers attitudes and motivations. Questionnaires or focus groups could potentially satisfy some aims of this project, but both were discarded for various reasons. Questionnaires do not allow the researcher to uncover prevailing attitudes or gain enough insight into the “life worlds” of the bloggers (Bauer and Gaskell 2000, Fielding and Thomas 2008). Focus groups would be useful for finding commonalities or discover group attitudes among China bloggers, but are not well suited to collecting individual attitudes. Furthermore, I did not discover another study approaching these blogs from the standpoint of the bloggers, thus it seemed prudent to treat the territory as relatively uncharted. In this instance, qualitative interviews are best when the “object is to find out what kinds of things are happening rather than to determine the frequency of predetermined kinds of things that the researcher already believes can happen” (Lofland 1971, quoted in Fielding and Thomas 2008: 247). Focus groups also proved impractical, geographically speaking because of the researcher’s and the bloggers’ dispersed locations.

While other methods were considered as possible supplement, semi-structured, qualitative interviews have always been my first choice, to better collect blogger viewpoints. Additionally, the pool of potential interviewees, the China bloggers themselves, are a diverse group of people. Their personal and professional experiences vary widely, making qualitative interviews a suitable choice (Fielding and Thomas 2008: 247). In addition to the reasons enumerated above, qualitative interviews seemed appropriate because of the potentially sensitive nature of the questions asked (Fielding and Thomas 2008: 248). All interviewees were given the option of anonymity, and two requested this. Since some of them write about subjects, which have resulted in the blocking of their blogs, I was unsure if questions about Chinese government censorship of the Internet would be problematic.

There are drawbacks to doing qualitative interviews. One of these is that the interviewer may be too unfamiliar with the terminology or lingo used by the interviewee; the interviewee may omit details, or may view situations through a distorted lens (Bauer and Gaskell 2000: 44). On the first point, I was not at all concerned about unfamiliarity as I lived in China and briefly wrote a blog myself while I was there. Additionally, I have professional experience researching blogs. Another potential problem is that interviewees may omit details. As Crouch and McKenzie point out, “Interviewing is an obtrusive method; that is to say, it elicits the statements to be analyzed” (2006: 486). The interviewer can attempt to make the interviewee as comfortable as possible, but there is no way to avoid that the respondent is put on the spot and may very well forget details or become lost in a related discussion and exclude some points.

Defending Telephone Interviews

While much methodological publication urges the use of in-person interviews, a number of studies have shown that telephone interviews can be appropriate and in some cases, preferred. For example, Sturges and Hanrahan’s study interviewing correctional officers and jail visitors, in which interviewees were given the option of doing the interview in person or over the phone, showed “no significant differences in the interviews” (107).

Previous studies showed that semi-structured, in-depth interviews could only be conducted in person, and that only short structured interviews could be done by phone (Harvey 1988, Fontana and Frey 1994, quoted in Sturges and Hanrahan 2004: 108). More recent studies, however, show that telephone interviews can be useful, and even preferred to face-to-face interviews depending on the subject of the interview. For sensitive subjects, a telephone interview can “increase respondents’ perceptions of anonymity” (Greenfield et al., 2000 quoted in Sturges and Hanrahan 2004:108). Additionally, the relatively low cost of conducting telephone interviews makes it an attractive option (Fenig and Levav 1993, quoted in Sturges and Hanrahan 2004: 108). Finally, telephone interviews are acceptable according to a number of published studies in instances where in-person interviews are impossible (Tausig and Freeman, 1998: 420 quoted in Sturges and Hanrahan 2004: 109).

Conducting the Interviews

I planned to contact the bloggers via email, which frequently is listed on the blog itself, and use Skype to conduct the interviews. I chose to use Skype because it is either extremely low cost or free to use, depending on what type of number one is calling. I suspected that since bloggers spend a significant portion of their time online, they would be fairly accessible by

email, and perhaps would not mind being approached for an interview by this method. Additionally, because many of them are expatriates living in China, I suspected that a number of them had Skype accounts already, though I offered to call the number that was most convenient.

The drawbacks to this approach, which were first apparent, were related to the occasional sound-quality problems associated with the program, especially when calling China.² Recording the calls was also a challenge as I could not find any free software applications and had to rely on an external digital recorder.

Pilot Study

As a pilot for this project, I interviewed 4 bloggers in Spokane, Washington. The pilot was limited in terms of number of participants, and the interviews were not analyzed in-depth. Understanding who to interview, and getting a feel for semi-structured, depth interviews were the primary lessons learned.

Sampling

I used a snowball sampling technique. I consulted Qi Tang's (2008) previous study and contacted 2 of the 3 bloggers that he studied. I listened to a Sinica podcast on the "death" of the China blogs and contacted a few other bloggers who were on a list of "must-read" China blogs (Kuo, Goldkorn and Moss 2010). Finally, I asked interviewees who else to speak to. Keeping in mind that the purpose of qualitative research is to "sample a range of views" (Bauer and Gaskell 2000:42), I wanted to interview bloggers with a diversity of professional backgrounds, to represent as many sides of alternative China reporting as possible. In total, I contacted 18 bloggers. Of that number, 12 returned my request but 3 declined to be interviewed for various reasons. I interviewed 9 bloggers in total.

All except three of the interviews were conducted via Skype, a computer software application that can make phone calls using the Internet. Most of them were Skype to Skype voice calls, which are free of charge. The two interviews were conducted in person, and all of the interviews were recorded with an external digital recorder. Finally, a key participant requested that he complete the interview by email, and because of his prominence in the China blogosphere, I acceded this request.

² I had first-hand experience having lived in China and used Skype to keep in touch with family and friends.

Topic Guide

The topic guide was initially drafted for the pilot project. I based it on broad questions or puzzlements (Lofland 1995, quoted in Fielding and Thomas 2008: 254) related to the realm of blogging, which were organized into themes. I revised the guide after this first interview based on areas where the flow of the interview was not optimal, and revised a second time after reviewing more literature on China, public sphere, and other studies on blogs. I also incorporated feedback from my fellow participants where applicable to my project. Finally, I customized the topic guide for each interview based around specific questions related to that particular blogger's experience or expertise. Overall, I attempted as best as possible, to structure the topic guide in such a way that the easiest most unobtrusive questions were at the beginning. As Bauer and Gaskell (2000) suggest, my topic guide was just that, a guide. I deviated from it if the interviewee had already answered the question, was short on time, if a particular answer was already evident or explicitly stated on their blog, or finally if the interviewee inspired me in one answer to skip to a particular question to attempt to investigate a certain theme more explicitly.

Analysis

I used thematic network analysis, inspired by Jennifer Attride Sterling's article on thematic networks (2001). This method was employed because of the inherent flexibility afforded the researcher in uncovering important themes in a data text at varying levels (Attride-Sterling 2001: 397). Moreover, it is a fitting method when one is interested in exposing "the meaning richness and magnitude of the subjective experience of social life" (2001: 403). Using thematic network analysis involves first coding the data, then organizing the codes into coherent groups, clustering those groups into layers of increasingly more abstract themes, and finally illustrating the network or networks (Attride-Sterling 2001). It is important to note, however that the analysis only emerges from the networks, and it essentially a description of the themes in the networks and the implications for the relevant theories being explored.

RESULTS

Between June 24 and August 4, I interviewed a total of 9 bloggers with an average length of 62 minutes and collected over 10 hours of data. To organize the data, I loosely employed Jennifer Attride-Stirling's (2001) step-by-step process of making thematic networks. First, I made a list of basic codes based on my topic guide. Next, I revised and streamlined them into three thematic groups based on my research questions. Finally, I built a database and

dissected the interview data. The analysis of these three thematic groups will be presented below, but first I will present the limitations of the study as well as summarize some of the more general results.

The first limitation of this study is a choice to study only China blogs, and not Chinese language blogs. My reasons for doing this have as much to do with my limited Mandarin language abilities as they do with my interest in exploring a particular perspective. I acknowledge that it is dangerous to make assumptions about China or the potential for the Internet and democracy in that country in the basis of this study so I have hesitated to do that.

The second limitation of this study is more of a bias and could be a preamble to every Western observation of China. As writer Bill Holm concluded in *Coming Home Crazy*, his account of living in China: “No Westerner ever really knows anything about China. It is too big, too old, too complicated, too unlike anything in our half-world made by Plato, St. Paul, and the British navy” (20). I echo these humble sentiments and reinforce that my attempts, therefore, in exploring this topic must be understood in the context of this bias.

Table 1: Blogger Profiles:

Blog/ Blogger Name	Age	Location	Nationality	Profession	Blocked?	Themes
Brian and Brian - Blogger A*	24	London	French	Student	no	Social commentary/parable
Blog B - Blogger B*	27	California	American	PhD student	no	Academic China-watching
Danwei- Joel Martinsen	32	Beijing	American	Blogger/Consultant	yes	Translation/media commentary
Six- Alec Ash	24	London	British	Unemployed	no	Young China
...in Shanghai- Marta Cooper	23	Shanghai	British	Graduate student	no	Social commentary/China-watching
China You Ren - Julen Madariaga	33	Shanghai	Spanish	Engineer	yes	Media commentary/China-watching
China Geeks - Charlie Custer	25	Beijing	American	Magazine Editor	yes	Translation/media commentary

Far West China - Josh Summer	28	Dallas	American	Freelance Writer	yes	Commentary on Xinjiang
SinosplICE- John Pasden	32	Shanghai	American	Linguistic Consultant	no	Personal reflection/ language tips

*Two interviewees requested that their names not be used, and Blogger B also requested that her blog name not be used.

Analysis: Commonalities

To begin each interview I asked all bloggers basic questions about their background, politics, media consumption, and the character of their blog in their own words. All of the bloggers I interviewed are currently, or have been expatriates living in China. They are all between the ages of 24-33, and all but two of them are male. Only one of them is a full-time professional blogger, and the rest write as a hobby. The majority of them are Americans, or native English speakers, with the exception of Blogger A of Brian and Brian and Julen Madariaga of China Youren. All of the blogs are written in English, though Madariaga did at one time post in his native Spanish as well.

The styles of their blogs vary widely: China Geeks and Danwei are bridge-blogs since they translate from the Chinese-language blogosphere into English, Blog B is the only blog which takes a more academic approach and invites well-known scholars and China-watchers to contribute, Six and Brian and Brian could be roughly described as student or youth culture blogs though the former profiles six young Chinese whereas the latter is a platform for the blogger and his contributors to share their experiences while studying abroad, China Youren and ...in Shanghai both focus on social commentary and China-watching, SinosplICE is the only blog with a focus on learning Chinese language, and Far West China provides a unique perspective on the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang.

Even though a number of the interviewees address political issues, when asked if they consider themselves politically active or politically aware, most replied that they were the latter but definitely not the former. Only one blogger, Charlie Custer of China Geeks, acknowledged that blogging and translating articles could be considered an activity, though he described himself only as politically aware.

Motivations

I asked bloggers why they started blogging and also what motivates them to continue. For most respondents, these reasons were similar and tended to mirror the results of Nardi, et al's study (2004) on blogger motivations. Also as cited in that study, I found that several motivations were cited simultaneously by each blogger, and one even described how his motivations evolved over time.

Blogging as a catharsis

You always have a lot more to say here and especially when...you're in a different culture and you want to learn the language and...things that are different in a way that you can't imagine when you're back home...and I think that is a great incentive to go and share it. (Julen Madariaga, personal interview, 2010)

Many of the respondents started blogging as a catharsis, by way of sharing observations on modern China, either to share with family and friends (e.g., John Pasden of Sinosplice, and Marta Cooper of ...in Shanghai) or with a global audience (e.g., Alec Ash, and Charlie Custer). Joel Martinsen of the blog Danwei described himself as a "media junkie"; he finds things that are of interest to him in mainstream or alternative press and wants to share them with a wider audience (personal interview, 2010). Marta Cooper echoed Madariaga's sentiments that her motivation to start writing was simply living in a dynamic and interesting place:

I started because I was seeing so much around me and dealing with a lot of culture shock and.... So blogging just...became a great outlet for everything that I was experiencing and it just it made me understand with perhaps...a more informed view of what China is going through.

Occasionally, blogging was a way to vent frustrations or discuss socio-cultural mishaps. As Blogger A said his blog, was "really for ourselves to blow off some steam" (personal interview, 2010). Custer remarked that his motivation for posting is reading something which provokes a passionate reaction in him: "there's something that happens and it makes me angry and I think people should know about it, and people should be aware it's happening and so I wanna translate it" (personal interview, 2010). All of these observations relate to the findings in both Nardi et al., and Tang which observed similar motivations among bloggers.

Blogging to present an alternative view of China

A noticeable number of blogger stated that they were dissatisfied with Chinese and Western mainstream media depictions of China and wanted to provide a counter-narrative, or even bring new information to the public discourse that was previously missing. One in particular, Alec Ash, noticed that the youth in China were misrepresented or simply left out of public discourse altogether even in the alternative press and started a blog to follow the lives of six young Chinese. He states that his main reason for writing is “there’s not enough written or known about young China, my generation of China” (personal interview, 2010).

Blogger B, notes that western mainstream media paints an incomplete picture of the country: “I get a lot of satisfaction when I hear somebody saying, ‘the New York Times makes this really linear narrative and then you read Blog B and you realize that there’s a whole history behind this current event, or that there are a lot more actors than you’d ever guess from what you see on CNN’” (personal interview, 2010). Josh Summer, author of *Far West China* found that perceptions of the province he was living in, Xinjiang were incomplete, misleading, or outright false so he decided to contribute his perspective as a westerner living there (personal interview, 2010). He noticed that false perceptions of Xinjiang came both from Chinese and westerners alike, with the latter frequently holding a skewed view of China itself.

Madariaga, mentioned the 2009 riots in Xinjiang³ as an example of the failure of both Chinese and western media. In his opinion, Chinese media is “99% rubbish” and only a mouthpiece for the party, but at least Chinese journalists “actually care about what they were doing and they were staying there in the conflict and they didn’t leave... as soon as the eyes of the world went to another news” (personal interview, 2010). Western mainstream media, while more reliable in terms of editorial control, portrayed the clash in the same light as the Tibet conflict, and only showed violence against Uyghurs and not against ethnic Han Chinese. In this instance, Madariaga used his blog to deconstruct the western media narrative in the context of Chinese media reports. Apart from presenting a counter-mainstream narrative, Madariaga is Spanish and notes that a motivation for starting his blog relates to the preponderance of American blogs, which he feels means a limited range of views are present in the China blogosphere (personal interview, 2010). This view relates to Qi Tang’s finding

³ See Teague 2009 for more information on the incident. Riots broke out in July 2009 between Uyghurs and Han as the former regard the province as their homeland and see the ethnic Han population as attempting to colonize them.

that Americans are one of the largest expatriate groups and that the “overwhelming majority of the China blogs are written by American citizens” (2008: 8).

Custer explained he used to readily find western media articles on China to deconstruct, however, he has noticed that they now scarce and sees generally that western reporting on China has improved (personal interview, 2010). The reasons for this, he feels, are possibly due to the quality of correspondents that Western media outlets are sending to China, but could also be related to China blogs themselves. Custer also mentioned that what is missing from mainstream Western media reporting is the perspective of Chinese people. He acknowledges this is likely due to two challenges for foreign correspondents: limited Chinese language skills, and access to average citizens. Both observations are corroborated by MacKinnon’s (2008) survey of foreign correspondents, which shows that a majority of correspondents not only read China blogs but also use them for story ideas.

The reflections described in this section link to Rodriguez’s concept of citizen’s media as being motivated by a group of people who are essentially dissatisfied with mainstream media reporting and “attempt to intervene in the established mediascape by reappropriating a mediated communication technology as a vehicle for their own voices” (2001: 164).

Blogging to knock down the Great Firewall

I also asked if bloggers considered Chinese government censorship of the Internet and if this motivated what they posted. While all but one of the bloggers stated that state censorship bothered them personally or professionally, many of them also remarked that there is little consistency in what information is censored. Again, many reiterated the motivation to post what they find interesting, bizarre, or unfairly represented and that they did not explicitly consider using their blog as a platform to broadcast censored information because it is unpredictable and unevenly applied. However, Martinsen and Custer, who both do translations of Chinese-language blog postings, comb the blogosphere daily to find postings which are frequently then removed by censors, meaning that the information is available somewhere, even if it is in English and a limited audience can read it. Thus, even though censorship is not a motivator according to bloggers themselves, their blogs do function in a way to disrupt it.

A number of bloggers, Martinsen and Madariaga in particular, take a very ‘matter-of-fact’ approach to censorship and have instructions for other bloggers on how to unblock their blogs. Additionally, Danwei, which has been blocked in Mainland China for over one year,

has a mirror site⁴ containing all of their original content. On the issue of censorship in particular, Madariaga is particularly passionate:

“I would say from my point of view the most important aspect that I would have to criticize the Chinese system is precisely that one, more than anything else... and that’s something that is very important because at the core of developing a civil society and developing the notion of equality and a democracy is the freedom of press.... And this is such an easy complete point, it’s so easy to prove and so fruitful if you fight for it. I think we should concentrate on that and I think that’s what I do as a blogger. So yes it’s essential” (personal interview, 2010).

Many of the interviewees and share this view, and expressed some level of frustration with internet censorship. At the 2009 Chinese bloggers conference, blogger Ran Yunfei stated when describing his personal motivation for blogging, “it is my hope to let information flow more freely. Only when that is achieved the country will have a future” (interviewed by Jeremy Goldkorn 2010).

Blogging as a community forum

This motivation revealed by Nardi et al. (2004), was one of the primary reasons a blogger in my pilot study started and maintains her blog (Arnot 2010, MC4M1 paper). She is a community organizer, so her blog is naturally an extension of that. For the China bloggers I surveyed however, this was a motivator for only a few. To try and determine the extent to which this might be a factor for China bloggers I asked if they considered their community of readers when deciding what to post and if it was important for them to create a sense of community for their readers. My intent was also based on assessing the claim that blogs, like other forms of electronic communication are insufficient to creating community (Nardi, et al. 2004: 45).

One blogger noted that she receives little feedback from readers, and subsequently does not think about them as much as she should when deciding what to post. Blogger B remarked that unfortunately she frequently does not know who her audience is, but that Blog B attempts to reach as broad an audience as possible. She noted that she and the other editors of Blog B are very aware that many of their readers do not know much about China and may not read Chinese so they attempt to bring issues to a general crowd (personal interview, 2010).

⁴ The mirror website is available at www.danwei.tv and contains all original *Danwei* content without links or comments.

Danwei conducted a survey of their readers a couple of years ago and found that their demographic were mainly westerners from a variety of professional backgrounds. However, Martinsen did not say that he thinks specifically about creating a sense of community for readers. While Danwei is widely read, Martinsen said the pieces he's most proud of on the site are not necessarily the most popular and that he will post about fascinating bits from Chinese mainstream and alternative media and is not motivated by how many people will read them. Madariaga mentioned that it is of course important to "have followers," but that he writes the blog for himself, not for his readers and it is sometimes frustrating that he's become aware of what kind of posts will generate a lot of feedback. Charlie Custer noted that he does make an attempt to create a constructive community dialogue by ending his posts with a question to guide readers.

In addition, I asked bloggers whether or not they themselves felt like they were a part of a China blogging community. Joel Martinsen, Julen Madariaga, and Charlie Custer all mentioned the "China blog scene" and spoke of knowing other China bloggers personally, although the general consensus was that there was not much offline association now as even five years ago. Josh Summer lamented the lack of interaction in China amongst bloggers but did say that he had met or corresponded with a couple of other bloggers, and cited his location in far-away Xinjiang as being a possible reason why the interaction was limited. Blogger B noted that she was able to network with others students and professors at her university after she started blogging. Cooper specifically had the China blogging community in mind when she started her blog, and noted that she wanted to get into the "conversation about China" (personal interview, 2010).

Blogging as writing practice

One motivation not highlighted by Nardi, et al, was blogging as a way to practice writing. A small but noticeable number of bloggers that I spoke to mentioned that blogging was an excellent way to hone the craft of writing as a hobby or possibly a future career in journalism (Cooper, Ash, personal interviews, 2010). Three bloggers mentioned finding themselves in a situation where they had limited opportunity to communicate formally in their native or second languages and that they actively sought out blogging as a way to keep up language practice (Martinsen, Madariaga, Blogger A, personal interviews, 2010). Additionally, the translation work that Martinsen and Custer do could also be considered Chinese language practice.

Summary of motivations: the evolution of one blogger's motivations

One blogger, Josh Summer, described the evolution of his motivations behind what to post from the beginning of this blog to the climax of the Internet blackout in Xinjiang province in 2009:

“I think a lot of blogs kinda go through this process: in the very beginning it was just, whatever happened to me that struck me as weird or fun or cool would be the next blog post... and then eventually I realized people were actually reading what I was writing. There was a little more thought that went into what I was writing because I'm always conscious of the fact that whatever I'm writing is going to be out there for a while and it's going to have my name on it.... Once things started happening in Xinjiang and internet was cut and I knew that every post I was able to make was you know, it was an opportunity in itself just because it was so difficult to get to that point where I could post... I'm no journalist but I tried to take a more journalistic approach during those times when I knew there weren't too many journalists who were able to get out to the places where I was” (personal interview, 2010).

This links to Joyce Nip's observations that citizen's media is at it's most powerful when the mainstream media fail (2009: 102).

Attitudes

Toward their Audience: strategies of interaction

More than a few of the respondents remarked that the comments on their blogs sometimes disintegrated into a chaotic state frequently between western readers and nationalistic Chinese readers, echoing a sense of agonism or even antagonism mentioned by Dean (2001) and Bailey, Carpentier, and Cammaerts (2008). Josh Summer noted that following two of his more controversial posts, the comments turned ugly and uncontrollable: “I like dialogue, I like interacting with people, and you know experiencing things but when it turns into nasty debate...I don't think there's much constructive stuff happening in that” (personal interview, 2010).

Bloggers conveyed a sense of being aware of their audience, mirroring the findings in Nardi, et al. (2004), though that awareness did not necessarily inform their writing process. Ash highlighted the tendency of some bloggers to react to negative comments from Chinese readers and stressed that he tries as much as possible not to pander to either Chinese nationalists or anti-China westerners. Madariaga responded by observing that he had

tempered his views on China after receiving negative comments from Chinese readers, and cited a particular Chinese-American blogger who has been a pesky commenter on a number of China blogs. For Blogger B, her awareness of her audience is based solely on emails because comments are not allowed on Blog B. However, she has noticed, with some amazement that postings from Blog B has been translated and re-posted in Chinese, meaning that at least part of her audience is Chinese. In addition to being pleased with his audience, Custer remarked that a number of commenters on his blog seemed quite knowledgeable about the subjects of his posts, which is a sentiment that Joel Martinsen echoed, but interestingly did not apply to his own blog. He mentioned that he makes a point to specifically read the comments on several blogs because they are from very informed readers.

Toward Accessibility

Keeping in mind the conditions for an “ideal speech situation” and in particular the importance of access for all participants to the public debate, I asked bloggers about how they manage feedback on their blogs. While some, Cooper and Blogger A, receive relatively few comments, one blog, Blog B, has comments turned off. Blogger B mentioned this as a limitation of Blog B and lamented that they simply do not have the staff to manage comments (personal interview, 2010). On this same issue, Martinsen explained that finding a way to balance access with intelligent participation was one of the biggest challenges: “if you open it up for all commenters, maybe it'll just sink to the lowest common denominator of discourse, but if you create barriers then some people who may have very valuable opinions will not be bothered to register or to jump over the hurdles involved in the conversation” (personal interview, 2010). Danwei did not allow comments prior to Martinsen joining the blog, and now that they do, they moderate them by a similar standard as other respondents (e.g., spam, ruthless and unnecessarily nasty comments).

Related to the issue of accessibility, many of the respondents' blogs are blocked in mainland China, making the content available to an audience limited to those outside China or those inside China who use a proxy server or VPN (virtual private network)⁵ to connect to the Internet. Blogger B mentioned this as the key site of the digital divide: “The most obvious is between people who use VPN connections to get access to, news and sites that are blocked in China and people who don't” (private interview, 2010).

⁵ See Jennings (2010) or www.freedur.net for more information.

Nearly all of the respondents stated that they do their best to respond to comments either on the blog itself or by email. The extent of the response varied from blogger to blogger with some saying that the dialogue frequently extends beyond one or two emails or posts, to others who say they frequently do not have time to respond to everything or continue the interaction beyond one or two replies. Custer noted that he makes a conscious effort not to let commenters be “trolls,” that is to say, he does not let them simply use the comment thread to hurl attacks at him or at other commenters. Most bloggers said they usually do not delete comments but will remove spam or uselessly hate-filled reactions. Josh Summer stated that he never thought he would delete comments or block commenters but now he will remove those that are profane, attack him or another commenter, or simply do not relate to the original posting.

Toward Anonymity

Madariaga noted that while he could understand the hopes of Internet utopians, he does not feel that blogging helps create an environment conducive to a thriving public sphere: “one of the big problems with the Chinese internet is there’s a lot of anonymous things going on...and when you do things anonymously I don’t think it has the value of creating a community... So in the end you’re getting lots of rants from different people about different aspects of Chinese political problems or whatever and then they get erased by the censors as well. It’s all very promising but I’m not so sure it’s really gonna take it somewhere” (personal interview, 2010). Blogger B echoed this sentiment when discussing how she frequently does not know who her audience is, “because the Internet is so big and so anonymous in many ways” (personal interview, 2010). This feeling is shared by a number of researchers who likewise cite anonymous interaction on the Internet as damaging to public life (Bailey, Carpentier, Cammaerts 2008; Dean 2001).

Toward the Relevance of China Blogs

Inspired by MacKinnon’s (2008) research on the interaction between China blogs and foreign correspondents, I asked bloggers what they made of the impact of theirs or other blogs on public discourse in China. Despite the translation of material between English and Chinese language blogs, none of the bloggers mentioned that they felt their work made a huge impact in the Chinese blogosphere. Danwei, started in 2003, is one of the oldest China blogs, and one that nearly all other bloggers mentioned in their interviews (as did MacKinnon (2008) in her study). Martinsen, however, was fairly modest in his assessment of the blog’s impact, especially on the Chinese blogosphere: “While we may have some readers who are

Chinese bloggers so there's a little bit of interaction, but the interaction is one way. They might know that we've translated it [a posting], but in my impression it doesn't really cause much of an impact" (personal interview, 2010). Martinsen mentioned an incident that is descriptive of the impact that Danwei has had. A Chinese blogger posted a story online about shanzhai culture⁶ using the pseudonym "Danwei" though he is not affiliated with the blog at all. Martinsen remarked that this in a way shows that Danwei has become well known in the Chinese blogosphere as an observer of Chinese culture, especially from a foreign perspective.

Custer surmised that Chinese blogs do have an impact on Chinese mainstream media and then in turn on the Chinese government because "if a story blows up to some extent on an internet, then the government sort of has to.... I mean it hurts them if they don't talk. So a story that might never have been anywhere 10 years ago now might find it's way online, if it blows up enough it'll become something that the government has to talk about" (personal interview, 2010). However, his assessment of the impact of China blogs on Western mainstream media was more tepid: "I think blogs serve the purpose of enriching the coverage in the mainstream media. I do know that a lot of these foreign correspondents in Beijing read my blog, and it's not like they write stories about it, but it must inform the coverage to a certain extent" (personal interview, 2010). This last observation is also what MacKinnon's survey of foreign correspondents showed: that China blogs are a useful source of information, but that they are not the only source of information (2008).

Summer mentioned that he has been contacted by foreign correspondents writing stories about Xinjiang and a posting by Madariaga on creating Chinese Internet metaphors of sensitive terms was linked in a New York Times article on the Chinese internet meme "cao ni ma."⁷

Summary

China bloggers attitudes and motivations are clearly varied, and while some match the findings in previous academic works (e.g. Nardi, et al. 2004), there are several that seem unique to the experience of blogging in China: *blogging as practicing languages and*

⁶ The term 山寨文化 "shan zhai wen hua" or *shan zhai culture* refers generally to imitation designer products, and here has a slightly negative connotation. However, some cultural arbiters in China have started to turn this meaning around and it can now also imply a grassroots effort similar to "culture jamming" (Canaves and Ye 2009).

⁷ When used as a code by Chinese netizens, 草泥马 "cao ni ma" literally translates as "grass mud horse" but another word with the same Romanized spelling (f- - - your mother) is a vulgar Chinese term which censors do not allow on the Internet. For more on this see Wines 2009.

writing, blogging as a way to get information around the censors, and blogging to present an alternative view. The last two can be linked to the potential impact of these blogs and relate both to MacKinnon's (2007, 2008) findings as well as to Tang's (2008) observation that China bloggers consciously try to position themselves in the discursive space outside of the Western mainstream media.

As Nardi, et al. (2004) claim, China bloggers awareness of their audience did not necessarily mean they used their writing to create a community of readers. This also relates to the critique of blogs as being too individualistically focused to be useful in facilitating public participation or enhancing democracy (e.g. Katz from Curran and Liebbes 1998, Mouffe from Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006). Returning to the impact of China blogs on transnational discourse, the bloggers who mentioned having worked with Western mainstream media outlets still did not make too much of the overall influence of their work on the Chinese blogosphere or an online transnational micro public sphere. These observations align not only with MacKinnon's (2007, 2008) findings but also with Keane's (2000) notion that the power of micro public spheres is that they are latent.

CONCLUSIONS

While China blogs definitely make some impact on Western mainstream media discourse, and this impact is undeniably valuable, the broader implications of this fact on the potential of blogs for democratic reform in China are still elusive. However, other observations are possible with the results of this study. First, expatriate blogs may have little measurable impact on the Chinese blogosphere, and negligible importance when it comes to democratic reforms, but it does seem that they are at least democratizing the discourse about China for a Western audience. Readers of any of the mainstream publications, which have relied on China blogs as a resource, are provided a more nuanced and varied narrative on China.

Second, according to the definitions laid out by Keane (2000), and Yang (2003) China blogs can be conceptualized as a transnational micro public sphere. The blogs are operationally small, written by transnationals, have a moderately sized audience, and make infrequent but noticeable contributions to global public discourse. Examined further, through the lens of the Habermasian public sphere, some present problems offered by various scholars for why blogs are not a public sphere. Many of the blogs have an individual opinion-oriented focus instead of a consensus-oriented focus; many are accessible to a limited audience either because of content, language, or censorship; and the discussion on a number of the blogs often disintegrates past the point of agonism and passion to a level of antagonism which is

counterproductive and damaging for Sino-Western relations. However, as Dean (2001) noted, simply because blogs may not fulfill the requirements of the idealized public sphere, this does not mean that blogs themselves are a failure in terms of promoting dialogue or change. Recalling the theoretical implications of citizen's media (Rodriguez 2001), I argue that trying to fit China blogs or any blogs into one framework and subsequently basing its merits on the outcome of that alone, means that we miss opportunities to discover the fluid nature of changing power dynamics between official and unofficial mediated discourse.

Third, it may seem like a small step, but acknowledging and even accessing multiple truths is of the utmost importance. Chinese blogger Chang Ping made the following observation in reaction to media coverage of unrest and violence in Tibet in 2008: "If in the reporting of the incident (as well as other major incidents), the Chinese media are not allowed to report freely and the overseas media are suspect, then where is the truth going to come from?" (Translated by Soong 2008). Ping directed this lament at a Chinese audience, but thanks to bridge blogger Roland Soong, a wider audience benefits from his wisdom. Ping's words identify what is, I argue, the key area for further inquiry within the realm of China blogs. Bridge blogging, already proven statistically as having the biggest impact on foreign correspondents was almost unanimously identified by my interviewees as having the greatest potential to influence mediated knowledge about China. Linguistic, cultural, geographical, and even virtual elements can all be barriers to understanding, but through small efforts to translate across these boundaries, perhaps there is some hope for the "global village."

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