

The defence of journalistic legitimacy in media discourse in China: an analysis of the Case of Deng Yujiao

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Abstract:

This article examines the response of Chinese mainstream journalists towards their citizen counterparts, through an analysis of how journalists constructed a discourse of “netizens” and journalism in the case of Deng Yujiao. The analysis is mainly drawn from a discourse analysis of the newspaper coverage of this case in the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and the relevant journalists’ reflexive articles on the same topic published in the *Journal of Southern Media Studies*. The discourse analysis is supplemented by interviews with 60 journalists in 2011 concerning their views of netizens in general and of the conflict between journalism and netizens in this particular case. Based on these three elements of analysis, this article offers an account of how institutionally-shaped journalistic norms and values have been used to set up and maintain the occupational boundaries of Chinese journalism, in an attempt to defend journalistic legitimacy by making a clear distinction between “amateur netizens/them” and “professional journalists/us”.

Keywords: journalistic legitimacy, media discourse, netizens, and Chinese journalism

Introduction

Traditional journalism gains its legitimacy by being identified as the sole legitimate producer and disseminator of information or as an authoritative reality-narrator (Matheson, 2004). In the new media age, the ability of the public to produce and distribute information inevitably presents challenges to the legitimacy of journalism, as journalism is no longer “telling people what they need to know” (Deuze, 2005). Such a challenge is preeminent in cases when the narrative of reality that citizens construct comes to be different to the one journalists are providing. A question thus arises concerning how journalism will respond to such a challenge with the aim of defending its legitimacy.

This article explores this question by analysing how journalists constructed a discourse of “netizens” (Internet users who actively participate in online discussions and get involved in online communities) and journalism in the case of Deng Yujiao, where the legitimacy of Chinese journalism was seriously challenged by netizens. The case of Chinese journalism is considered as an example of 1) the construction of a discourse of “netizens” that is shaped by journalistic values and 2) journalists’ collective reflection on and self-modification of their role and identity, a process in which journalists are ‘rethinking and reinventing’ themselves (Deuze et al., 2007).

The analysis in this article is comprised of three parts. The discourse analysis is drawn from two data sources: newspaper coverage of the case in the *Southern Metropolitan Daily (SMD)* and the relevant journalists’ reflexive articles on the same topic published in the *Journal of Southern Media Studies (JSMS)*. The *SMD* is a commercial newspaper which was launched in Guangdong Province in 1995. It enjoys a high circulation¹ and a reputation for investigative journalism. This newspaper is owned by the *Southern Daily Media Group*, a multimedia conglomerate, which possessed eleven newspapers, six magazines, three websites and a book publisher at the time when this article was written. This conglomerate is famous for being China’s “best training centre” (*huangpu junxiao*) for journalists and boasts a high level of journalistic professionalism². The *JSMS* is a journal launched by the conglomerate to provide a national platform for journalism practitioners to exchange views and reflect on their practice. The discourse analysis is supplemented by interviews with journalists to further an understanding of the journalists’ views of netizens and the conflict between journalists and netizens in this particular case. Based on these three elements of analysis, this article aims to provide insights into how institutionally-shaped journalistic norms and values have been used to set up and maintain the occupational boundaries of Chinese journalism, in an attempt to defend journalistic legitimacy by making a clear distinction between “amateur netizens/them” and “professional journalists/us”.

Journalistic legitimacy

Legitimacy acts to justify the actions and decisions of certain social groups, organizations and individuals in a society (Clayman, 2002, Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). Journalists gain legitimacy by presenting themselves as the sole authoritative producers and disseminators of information, providing credible narratives of reality or truth (Clayman, 2002, Ekström, 2002, Hanitzsch, 2007). Such an authoritative role of journalists in describing and defining reality helps clarify the boundaries of journalism and consolidate the cultural authority of the media (Zelizer, 1992, Zelizer, 1990).

Journalists rely on a variety of means and resources for the maintenance of legitimacy and its boundary maintenance exercise (Clayman, 2002). Prominent among others is constructing professional norms, such as ‘objectivity’, ‘aligning with the public’ and ‘providing authoritative versions of reality’ (Clayman, 2002, Zelizer, 1992, Zelizer, 1990, Matheson, 2004; Zelizer, 1993; Carlson, 2007; Lewis, 2012;

Lowrey, 2006; Bishop, 1999). These norms and strategies are used to construct an image of 'professional journalists' and to claim the professional status of journalism. For example, the dichotomy of "subjective story-telling versus objective reporting" is constructed to demarcate the distinction between professional journalists and amateurs as well as between professional and paparazzi journalists (Fakazis, 2006).

In the Internet age, traditional mainstream journalism across the globe is facing an enormous challenge to its legitimacy from its readers (Deuze et al., 2007, Hermida and Thurman, 2007). Ordinary people now have the chance to take the initiative to self-publish their knowledge, views and stories, instead of relying on professional journalists (Castells, 2009). When average Internet users are able to provide narratives of reality, no matter whether they are consonant or dissonant to the ones journalists offer, this inevitably challenges journalists' legitimacy, as journalists are no longer the sole information producers and reality-narrators. Such an active role for amateurs in the communication process leads us to think about how mainstream journalism responds to the challenges presented to it by its citizen counterparts and the content they produce, in order to maintain its legitimacy under such circumstances.

Some western scholars describe the content produced by ordinary Internet users – often referred to as User Generated Content (UGC) – as "democratising" journalism, "pluralising" public opinion, and driving changes in the mainstream media by using new technologies (Tilley and Cokley, 2008). Despite this, many studies have shown that professional journalists are uncomfortable with, and even hostile towards, the content produced by Internet users (UGC) and at best, mainly regard it as a source for news reports (e.g. Williams et al., 2011, Wardle and Williams, 2010, Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2010, Hermida and Thurman, 2008, Singer, 2010). UGC is thus seen as "devaluing", "eroding", and "undermining" the quality of information and the public interest. This discourse is used to distinguish professional journalists from amateur citizen producers (Tilley and Cokley, 2008). Nevertheless, the research studies mentioned here are based on Western experience and are unlikely to provide a universal answer to this question, as the challenges of UGC and mainstream journalism's responses may vary from country to country.

Netizens and the legitimacy of journalism in China

At first glance, Chinese journalists appear to be friendlier to netizens and UGC than their Western counterparts. The existence of struggles between governments and journalists over journalistic autonomy pushes journalism to embrace the emancipation potential of netizens. Since the 1980s, when media marketisation started, Chinese journalism has gradually moved away from the party orbit and achieved a certain manoeuvring space for its practice (Pan and Chan, 2003, Pan, 2000). Increasingly influenced by the professional journalism model in the U.S., Chinese journalism has developed a form of professional ethos that has job autonomy at its heart (Lin, 2010). The conventional practice and occupational norms of Party journalism are becoming obsolete (Lee, 2000; Zhou, 2000). The old

legitimacy of Chinese journalism that was achieved on the basis of being the Party's journalism has been shaken. The current legitimacy of Chinese journalism has been re-constructed and maintained by 1) practicing different genres of journalism, among which investigative journalism is preeminent, 2) claiming certain attributes of professionalism such as "objectivity" and "seeking truth", and 3) organising unofficial journalistic communities that promote collective journalistic norms among journalists (Zhou, 2000; Pan and Lu, 2003; Zhang, 2010).

Despite this promising side to the situation, Chinese journalists lack the freedom to interpret reality fully. Journalistic narratives of reality first of all have to be consistent with those of the political authorities. After more than thirty years of media commercialisation, scholars and journalism practitioners alike now realise the limitations of the market in permitting and fostering liberalisation and the persistence of political control over journalism (Lee et al., 2007, Lee et al., 2006). In pursuit of profits and privilege in the market, some commercialised news media have already chosen the side of the political authorities in return for beneficial policies (Lee et al., 2006, Tong and Sparks, 2009). China's political authorities, moreover, have an ostensibly unconstrained control over the media. For example, on the 1st of September 2011, the *Beijing News* (*xinjingbao*) and the *Jinghua Times* (*jinghua shibao*) were compulsorily placed under the direct administration of the Beijing municipal propaganda department. This administrative command is widely regarded as a signal of backward movement away from press reform and of the suppression of free speech in China. Under such circumstances, the biggest challenge to journalism's legitimacy in being the sole information producers and disseminators comes from the political authorities rather than from netizens. This increases the allure of collaborating with netizens who have the potential for emancipation (Tai, 2006, Zhou, 2009).

The growth in Internet use in China is among the fastest in the world. The number of Chinese netizens increased to 591 million by June 2013³. Quite a large number of "pertinent, vigorous deliberative debates" and stories on public and political issues have been presented in the online public space (Hung, 2003; Lagerkvist, 2005; Zhou, 2006; Li, 2010: 75). Influential cases, such as the Case of the Chongqing Nail House⁴ in 2007 and the Case of Guo Meimei⁵ in 2011, have been revealed in the first instance by netizens and then picked up by mainstream journalists.

The prevailing scholarly view regards Chinese journalism as welcoming the participation of netizens in online discussions (Xin, 2010; Chan et al., 2006; Zhao, 2008; Lagerkvist, 2005). Proponents of this view advance three reasons for their optimism. Firstly, as an alternative news dissemination channel, the Internet offers a space for netizens to distribute content that helps offline journalism circumvent top-down political control. Chinese journalism therefore embraces this possibility of gaining more autonomy from the political authorities. Secondly, given the huge number of Internet users and their geographically dispersed nature, Internet users are quicker to access happenings in every corner of society than professional journalists. Journalists are keen to turn to the content generated online by netizens

for news sources. The final, more passive, reason is that under the pressure of the large amount of information presented and the intensive public opinion expressed online, the mainstream media have to treat netizens in a friendly manner in order to gain the trust of readers. This is seen as a result of the irresistible influences of netizens that cannot be ignored (Li et al., 2003).

This 'honeymoon' period nevertheless did not last long. In addition to presenting challenges to the authoritative role of journalism in information production and dissemination, netizens are not always able to remain collaborative and harmonious with journalists. The mood online is unpredictable and may oppose journalism. The situation may well take a turn for the worse when netizens become hostile toward journalism or if netizens' interpretation of reality comes to differ from that provided by journalists. This thus puts Chinese journalism in a tricky dilemma. The flourishing of content generated by netizens has offered the possibility for journalism to ally with netizens to support its contest with political authorities for control over communication. On the other hand, journalism also competes with netizens for the authority to interpret reality. Either an over-intimacy between journalists and netizens or the development of hostility towards journalists from netizens may threaten the authority of journalism in defining reality. How to respond to the latent challenges posed by netizens, whose activities might also have the potential to be liberating is a key question for Chinese journalism. Do journalists use journalistic norms and values to judge netizens and their UGC practice? Does Chinese journalism construct a dichotomy between professional journalism and amateur netizens, just as their Western counterparts often do?

This present study explores these issues through examining journalism's responses to, and perception of, netizens and journalism when journalistic accounts of reality come into conflict with those of netizens. Four research questions are to be answered:

- 1) How do journalists describe netizens and journalism in their writings when their narratives of reality are different to those of netizens?
- 2) How do journalists describe the conflict between journalists and netizens in their writings?
- 3) Is the UGC practice of netizens compared with the work of journalists in journalists' writings?
- 4) How do journalists view netizens and the conflict between journalists and netizens over defining reality?

Methodology

This study takes a case study approach, which can offer insights into a particular social phenomenon by examining the phenomenon in a narrowed-down real life context (Swanborn, 2010). It chooses to examine the case of Deng Yujiao, as in this case journalists and netizens interpreted reality in a completely different and even conflicting way. In doing so, this study offers a perspective to contribute to an

understanding of the situation.

The Case of Deng Yujiao

In 2009, Deng Yujiao, then a young waitress working in a karaoke bar in the small town of Yesanguan in Hubei Province, stabbed a local official to death during an attempted rape (Branigan, 2009). When the story became public online, there was a great deal of sympathy expressed by netizens towards Deng Yujiao. Mainstream Internet opinion viewed Deng as a heroine, bravely resisting the local official, who symbolised the power of the government (Wines, 2009; Chao, 2009). However, coverage of this misfortune by the traditional media presented a different angle. Among others, a report in the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* portrayed Deng Yujiao as an irrational girl while Deng Dagui, the local official, was described as being a father and husband; in this way the report cast the official in a sympathetic light. The publication of this report resulted in a clash between the two narratives, one given by netizens and the other by the daily paper. Netizens expressed outrage towards the journalist, who was accused of having betrayed journalistic professionalism and of lying to the public⁶.

Research design

This research has selected two types of articles for discourse analysis in detail: 1) all 22 news articles on the case of Deng Yujiao published in the *SMD* from the 11th of May (the day after the killing) to the 31st of December 2009, and 2) all seven reflexive articles written by journalists - including those who participated in reporting the case - published in a special issue of the *JSMS* dealing with the case. The 22 articles were retrieved from the website of the *SMD*, including all hard news and in-depth reports (excluding commentaries). The retrieved results were compared with the articles available on the Wisers database (the largest Chinese news database, based in Hong Kong) to ensure all news articles had been included. The reports written by the journalists at this newspaper are at the centre of the criticisms made by netizens. The 7 reflexive articles are all articles published in that special issue.

In order to answer Questions 1-3, these articles have been analysed using the discourse analytical approach suggested by van Dijk (1988) and Fairclough (1995). This approach recommends a reading of text in an inductive and exploratory way, looking for evidence in the text (Trappes-Lomax, 2005). The validity of discourse analysis lies in whether or not a "trustworthy" analysis is created rather than reliability (Gee, 1999: 89), as it is possible to have more than one account of the social world (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The author has adopted the checklist recommended by Bryman (2012: 389-398) to ensure the quality of the present study. The analysis of the 22 news articles focuses on analysing the images of netizens and journalism and the ways in which these news articles present information, i.e. whether and how these articles have used rhetorical devices, made comments, merely presented facts, or quoted news sources' comments. The 7 reflexive articles have been analysed with an emphasis on examining the representation of netizens and journalists, the ways of defining the clash between the two narratives provided

by journalism and netizens as well as the explanations for and comments on the respective performance of netizens and journalists in this case. Discursive strategies, especially lexical choices, presupposition, news sources and rhetoric, are examined. In addition, in view of the importance of using numbers in qualitative research (Sandelowski, 2001), the author has followed the approach that Fairclough (2000) has taken in examining the presence of key lexical words such as netizens, the proportions of news sources and associated meanings.

For this research, interviews were also conducted in 2011 with 60 journalists about their views of netizens and the conflict between netizens and journalists in the case of Deng Yujiao, in order to answer Question 4. Participants included both those who have and those who have not participated in reporting on the case of Deng Yujiao. Most of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. All transcripts were analysed in NVivo. Anonymity was agreed and ethical approval was sought and given before starting data collection. The author has had personal experience as a journalist and thus is familiar with journalism. This experience has helped the author to understand the words of journalists in the interviews, which has facilitated further development by the author of an insider's view of the relevant issues. On the other hand, however, the author is aware of the possible influences of personal biases and pre-existing viewpoints and of problems caused by being too familiar with these issues. In the analysis, therefore, the author has endeavoured to see the data through the eyes of an outsider, in order to avoid being biased, and to see familiar issues as sociologically strange. This is an art of balance between "familiarity and strangeness" (Gray, 2003: 84). Taking an interpretive approach, in the analysis of interview data the author has tried to construct the meanings of participants from "the participants' own accounts" (Maxwell, 1992: 290). The categories of the themes and meanings emerge from the data rather than being pre-fixed. The analysis of the interviews contributes to, and supplements, our understanding of the images of netizens and journalism contained in the text.

A dichotomy of image in media discourse

Depicting Netizens

Taking the evidence overall, a negative image of netizens was present in both the news articles and the reflexive articles. First of all, netizens are invisible and voiceless in the news articles. Despite the heated expression of opinions online, netizens had very little visibility in these news articles: their online comments were seldom quoted in the newspaper's coverage of the story. News articles mainly cited "authoritative" news sources such as government sources, solicitors, officials, academics and experts, and doctors; these constitute 50% of the news sources appearing in the articles. Only 4.3% of the news sources were netizens and they were quoted mostly in the context of criticising their behaviour and expressions.

This image was constructed by the choice of negative lexical words to use in

association with netizens and also by making presuppositions about their motives and behaviour. The word 'netizens' was mentioned 28 times in the 22 news articles and 81 times in the 7 reflexive articles. In 7 of the 22 news articles that mentioned netizens in the text, 6 articles connote netizens with the negative association of unreliability and lack of credibility. 6 out of the 7 reflexive articles also show a clearly negative attitude toward netizens. Negative words associated with netizens are "nonsense", "biased", "ridiculous", and "irrational", but also "storm-like", "flood-like", and "influential" as evidenced in the following example:

- 1) The local government did not stop supporting journalistic investigations until the situation became intense when **netizens attempted to insanely flood into Badong**. After that, netizens gained their understanding of events **through the traditional media**. Though they no longer had access to Badong, at least they had a **reliable** channel through which to be kept **informed**. This reduced **their feelings of "insecurity" resulting from their lack of knowledge of the situation** (How The Media Expressed Public Opinion in the Case of Deng Yujiao, in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009, my emphasis)

In this example, words and phrases such as "insanely", "flood", "insecurity" and "lack of knowledge" are used to refer to "netizens", while words like "reliable" and "informed" are associated with traditional media. This example not only depicts an image of netizen 'invaders' who are completely lacking in rationality, but also accuses netizens of being responsible for the local government's actions in preventing out-of-town journalists from reporting the case. There is also a presupposition that netizens lack knowledge of the situation and therefore easily feel insecure, while traditional journalists are reasonable and reliable and have an advantage over netizens in terms both of rationality and access to authoritative news sources.

Netizens are seen as "masses" who lack their own judgement, do not trust facts, are easy to mobilise emotionally and rely on feelings and imagination to reach conclusions about what happened. The following two quotations are good examples of this:

- 2) In the situation of **extreme lack of news sources, netizen Butcher**, who had very strong social skills, persuaded the psychiatric hospital to let him meet and make a video of Deng Yujiao. Though **lacking basic media literacy**, (his **emotional** and real-time communication catered to the **emotion** of netizens and thus immediately influenced online public opinion. After that, the traditional media were in a passive position because what Butcher did had persuaded netizens to **imagine** Deng Yujiao as a "martyr" while forming an image of (Deng Guida) as an "evil official". Whoever tried to subvert such an image, **even with facts**, would suffer bad fortune. (Balanced Reporting Cannot Succumb to Online Public Opinion, in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009, my emphasis)
- 3) (According to the **trial judge of Badong Court**) "netizens **also can include** some people who have **strong professional knowledge**. However, they **do not know the truth**. Therefore, their comments are **rambling and nonsense**" (The Case of a Martyr Stirred Up Judicial Rationality, in *SMD*, December 30, 2009, my emphasis)

These examples illustrate several discursive strategies in traditional journalism's depiction of netizens. First, the individual netizen "Butcher" has been labelled as part of a group, which generalises his individual activities. Second, words associated with netizens and "Butcher" are "emotional", "emotion", "imagine", "rambling" and "nonsense" which are completely opposite to rationality and reason. Thus the descriptions in the examples portray a negative image of netizens that is closely linked to lack of knowledge and irrationality. Netizens are described as being a group of people who often lack access to 'news sources', 'basic media literacy', 'professional knowledge', and 'the truth'. They rely on 'emotion' and 'imagination' for their judgment of reality and so can only offer "rambling" and "nonsensical" comments. Third, authoritative figures such as "the trial judge of Badong Court" are quoted as news sources to add to the credibility of traditional journalism. Journalists' privileged access to authoritative news sources is used to demonstrate the gullibility of netizens arising from their disadvantaged position, and thereby to demonstrate the superiority of journalists to netizens. Fourth, the third example asserts the presupposition that netizens often do not have strong professional knowledge, and implies that even if they have, they still produce nonsensical comments because they suffer from lack of knowledge of the true picture.

Defining the Clash

What happened between netizens and traditional journalists in this case is well illustrated in the reflexive articles written by journalists and editors from different news organisations, such as the *SMD*, the *Guangzhou Daily*, the *Caijing Magazine*, and the *Southern Weekend*. These authors largely define the clash between netizens and journalism in the case of Deng Yujiao as being a conflict between the independence of journalism and the irrational imagination and emotion of netizens. The analysis in these articles clearly blames the clash on the dichotomy of "the independence and objectivity of journalism" versus "the emotion and imagination of netizens". The following extract from a reflexive article is representative:

- 4) In a situation when **objective** reports do not align with **the imagination and emotion** of online users and even subvert and smash the images held by netizens, there will be strong emotional reactions. Journalists who have participated in such reporting have been scolded as "fifty-cent party" [i.e. paid to make such reports, allegedly by political authorities] and have even been "human flesh searched"⁷ (the severest case being that of the *SMD* **journalist who was attacked by netizens** because of his report "The Fatal Encounter of A Waitress and An 'Investment and Development Office' Official" which was inconsistent with the version of the story imagined by netizens. Other media have encountered similar experiences.) (Balanced Reporting Cannot Succumb to Online Public Opinion, in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009, my emphasis)

There is a clear dichotomy expressed here between "objective reports" and "online imagination and emotion", which in turn implies a dichotomy of reason versus emotion. This example also defines the clash as a "journalist was attacked by netizens because of his report" rather than as journalists attacking netizens or

journalists and netizens attacking each other. This sentence is a passive construction in which the subject can be hidden completely. But in this example, the subject is clearly indicated, which implies some sense of blame: netizens need to take responsibility. Journalists argue in these articles that professional journalists should remain independent and objective especially at a time when there is a flood of agitated and irrational public opinion. For them, this is a key value of traditional journalism, which should avoid being hijacked by public opinion. The logic behind this fits the ideological framework that assumes professional journalism should be independent and objective and able to guide public opinion either online or offline, rather than be guided by it.

Constructing a Self-image of Journalism

While constructing an image of amateur netizens, a self-image of independence, objectivity and authority was constructed for journalism in both the newspaper coverage and the reflexive articles under consideration. The content of the newspaper articles conveys a sense of objectivity and authority in the way information is presented. Examining the way journalists present information in their articles, we find that objective means of presentation are twice as frequent as subjective means. For example, objective 'facts' (9 times) and 'quotations' (22 times) were used 31 times while the subjective terms 'rhetoric' (3 times) and 'comments' (8 times) only appeared 11 times in the articles. As we have discussed above, these news articles mainly cite authoritative news sources for information. Because ordinary netizens find it difficult to obtain access to these sources, the use of such sources increases the level of authority and credibility of these articles. Credible news sources are used to distinguish the content produced by journalists from that which is created by netizens.

In the seven reflexive articles (with one exception), objectivity is used as a key value in describing professional journalism. Journalistic values such as "objectivity", "truth", "balanced reporting", "independence", "guiding public opinion", and "professionalism" are mentioned frequently in the articles. What is noticeable is that when the articles blame netizens and the content produced by them for lacking credibility and truthfulness, they often mention journalistic values, such as objectivity, professional training, and credibility to distinguish the output of the amateur netizen from professional journalism. Journalists explain they have to 'tell the truth' and 'present facts', even if these truths and facts might be the opposite of what netizens believe. This is "because I am a journalist" (The Case of Deng Yuujiao, A Journalist's Position, in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009). The journalist from the *Caijing* Magazine, who reported on this case, argues "we reflected on our reports. We can say our reports are an objective record of the evolution of the event rather than biased reports. I think to report news events as objectively as possible not only fits the professional standards of journalism but also avoids the impact of potential risks that biased reports may have on our reputation" (I Choose to Observe Calmly and Record Objectively, in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009). It is even stated that "only by being a professional, can one be objective" (Only By Being Professional Can One Be Objective,

in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009). This statement further makes the professional boundaries of journalism clear.

Boundaries have been drawn not only between journalists and netizens, but also between journalists and solicitors, who acted as leaders of opinion among netizens in the case of Deng Yujiao. Two solicitors representing Deng Yujiao played an active role in mobilising online public opinion. There was then some competition between journalists and solicitors for the authoritative right to define reality. Journalists provided their views on this in their reflexive articles, which defined the role and position of journalism and sought to protect the professional boundaries of journalism, such as:

- 5) However, because of occupational interests, nothing anyone says can be taken at face value, - **let alone what is said by solicitors** - who are selective as to the facts and say what is beneficial to themselves. As representatives of the media, we want to know more than this, **especially we want to know what has been covered up**. If we become friends with solicitors, we lose the power to ask for the unrevealed part of the truth... The relationship between journalists and solicitors should be a relationship of balance. (The Case of Deng Yujiao, A Journalist's Position, in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009, my emphasis)

This is an interesting example in which the journalist explains the journalist-solicitor relationship and implies that solicitors tend to hide the truth from the public, and which treats solicitors as a type of news source which may not always be truthful. "What is said by solicitors" is associated with "what has been covered up" that appears later in the text. The description in example 5 presupposes that solicitors will cover up the truth and the job of journalists is to remove the veil and seek for truth. "Seeking for truth" is prominently defined in the discourse of the reflexive articles as the role of journalism, as demonstrated in the following two examples:

- 6) This is of course unquestionable. **Traditional media practitioners with their higher professional training and media literacy should find the truth** when **online public opinion is full of noise** and it is difficult to tell what is true or false. Only truth and the right to be informed is the right way to guide public opinion toward **rationality**. (Balanced Reporting Cannot Succumb to Online Public Opinion, in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009, my emphasis)
- 7) The role of the media should be to dig out the truth. The truth is most powerful. (Only by Being Professional Can One Be Objective, in *JSMS*, August 26, 2009)

From this discourse analysis, one can find a clear distinction between "professional journalists" and "amateur and irrational netizens" in the texts of both the news articles and the journalists' reflexive articles. On the one hand, netizens are underrepresented in the news articles and represented in a negative way, in which an image of irrationality and emotionalism has been constructed. For journalists, netizens can only be a type of news source rather than collaborators. On the other hand, the role and practices of journalism have been reflected on and defined. A professional and rational image has been constructed for journalism. The discourse analysis reveals a dichotomy of irrational and amateur "netizens" versus rational and professional "journalists". This study has found that Chinese journalists tend to

exclude the voices of netizens from their news coverage, and to assert their superiority to netizens who may even cause problems for journalists who are trying to investigate and arrive at “the truth”.

Netizens and journalism in journalists’ eyes

Journalists’ views of netizens and journalism in this case (summarised in Table 1) offer some explanations for the images of netizens and journalism that we have discussed already. Likewise, their discourse in the interviews is characteristic of a dichotomy of amateur netizens and professional journalists.

Netizens are deemed as influential but emotional, while UGC is unreliable. Admittedly, netizens are considered to have potential for dismantling the conventional propaganda control and broadening the scope of speech in China. Netizens, nevertheless, are inclined to be emotional and irrational on some occasions, such as in the case of Deng Yujiao. This point is exemplified in the comments one participant made on netizens: it is quite easy to stir extreme emotions among netizens and amplify them in such a way that rational voices tend to be buried in an emotional vortex (interview, 2011). Overall, journalists judge netizens to be angry people whose anger needs to be released before it explodes. Netizens are angry because of problems and tensions in social reality. Two types of topics are likely to trigger the explosion of netizens’ negative emotions. One surrounds the conflict between officials/governments and people, and the other is the gap between the rich and the poor. The Internet generally, and Weibo in particular, is believed to “enable the outbreak of once-suppressed public emotions. A classic sentiment of this kind is the public’s distrust of the political authorities, which leads to distrust in everything” (interview, 2011). The case of Deng Yujiao is thought of by participants as a typical story in which socio-politically disadvantaged individuals oppose bad officials, which fits the imagination of netizens about the nature of Chinese society. The doubts of netizens concerning the credibility of journalists’ reports are thus merely a reflection of their distrust in the public authorities.

Journalists interviewed in this study tend to see UGC merely as an alternative source of news that enriches journalists’ reporting, but which is also characterised by a lack of credibility, possessing large volume but low quality. Nearly all participants regard UGC as mixing reliable and unreliable information, and believe that the ordinary public finds it difficult to distinguish between the two. One important role journalists see themselves as playing in the new media environment is to check the authenticity of UGC, distinguish and select accurate from inaccurate information, integrate accurate information from different sources into articles and then present these articles to the general public as a whole. For example, interviewee B asserts that:

“Although there are all kinds of information, such as complaints, which provide news sources for investigative journalism, people do not know if the information they receive from the Internet is true or fake. For us, as professional journalists, the first job we should do is to check (the credibility of the information), recover (the truth), understand deeply (the logical relations among the information), and

organise (the information) well to reveal what has happened” (interview, 2011).

There is a strong consensus among journalists that they must continue to be professional in the new media era. For these participants, only articles that have been well-researched and written in a professional way can obtain epistemic authority and these articles are usually created and published by journalists. The notion of professionalism is embodied in the traits of 1) producing content as a job; 2) having enough time and financial support to do this; 3) reporting authentic information in an objective and balanced way and recovering the truth; 4) having access to authoritative news sources; 5) taking legal responsibility. These attributes are exactly what netizens lack.

As for the conflict between journalists and netizens with regard to the narratives of the case of Deng Yujiao, most of the participants expressed their support for what journalists did in reporting this case, on the grounds that it is professional. For example, interviewee A said:

“if I were XXX (one of the relevant journalists), I would also have written like that... as a journalist, you can only say that you do your best to look for the closest approximation to the truth, and write what you have seen. You cannot write that the official is bad just because you feel the official is bad. That is not being a journalist, but a novelist. Though some (netizens) are rational, many netizens are irrational. Otherwise why are we journalists needed?”

One can identify a strong professionalism in the discourse of journalists about themselves. In the interviews, journalists often mention professional values, of which key examples are “objectivity” and “seeking for truth”, to describe and define their work and distinguish what they do in work from what netizens do online. Such a discourse of “professional”, “authoritative” and “irrational” that repeatedly appears across the interviews as an important distinction between journalistic work and the performance of netizens, perfectly matches the dichotomy in media discourse. Underlying the polarised images of amateur netizens and professional journalists is journalists’ instinct for defending their legitimacy in the face of challenges.

Discussion

The above analysis of this case study reflects three aspects of the response of Chinese journalists to their citizen counterparts. First, when encountering the challenges by netizens to their legitimacy, Chinese journalists defend themselves by distinguishing the work of journalism from the activities of netizens and drawing clear occupational boundaries for journalism. This point echoes the existing findings of scholars in the Western context. This suggests the attitude of journalists toward their citizen counterparts differs from the positive picture other scholars have depicted, namely that Chinese journalists have embraced the rise of netizens and see them as collaborators. Rather, Chinese journalists treat netizens merely as alternative news sources, regard their own practices as superior, and view netizens through the traditional journalistic lens. This case study has found that the discourse of netizens is collectively constructed: although being able to produce and publish information, netizens are unprofessional, due to their lack of literacy and access to authoritative

figures and to key information. Such a discourse is judged and justified by institutionalised journalistic norms, such as objectivity, which clearly embody elements of the professional norms of U.S. journalists, though what these norms actually mean to Chinese journalists remains vague and requires further research to elucidate.

Second, in the interplay between UGC and mainstream journalism, the latter - though under siege - still sees itself occupying a dominant position that tends to manipulate the former. The attitude of Chinese journalism, in so far as it is welcoming, is a top-down elitist embrace of UGC. Such an embrace is not celebrating the chance for the ordinary public to speak out and pluralise the Chinese public space, but is praising the potential support UGC might give to Chinese journalism to fulfil journalism's social function. UGC is treated as inferior to professional journalistic outputs, as the credibility of UGC can only be proved after investigation by professional journalists and publication in mainstream media coverage. When online public expression sits on the same side as mainstream media, mainstream media utilise online public expression as an effective tool to widen access to its reports. When there is a clash of the narratives of reality between netizens and traditional journalists, journalistic values and strategies, such as rhetorical strategies and the stress on professional norms to maintain journalistic authority, have been used to build up boundaries around the occupation of journalism. In doing so, Chinese journalists have developed a concept of professionalism that more or less matches the idea of journalistic professionalism in the West, especially the professionalism of U.S. journalism.

Third, in the whole process, a positive image of journalism is constructed and the role of journalism has been defined. This case shows that the practices and values of journalism are not forged passively; rather this occurs through an active construction process. Such a process takes place through interaction with other social entities, for example netizens, in this case. Within this process, journalists distinguish the boundaries of journalism and oppose the intrusion of other social entities; journalism reclaims its traditional journalistic values over and over again. This is the process by which journalism adapts to changes in its external environment, acting as an integral part of the evolution of journalism in a society.

These three aspects suggest the active rather than passive nature of Chinese journalism in defining and defending its occupational domain, maintaining its boundaries and legitimacy. This thus is a boundary-building activity that may legitimise an occupational group in a society (Dooley, 2000). On this particular point, there is not much difference between Chinese journalism and journalism in other parts of the world.

Conclusion

The analysis and discussion in this case study provides some answers to questions about ways in which journalists respond to the challenges posed by their

citizen counterparts when both sides come into conflict over the different narratives of reality they are providing. The discussion complements our understanding of Chinese journalism and journalism in general. Despite having a welcoming attitude toward netizens for the sake of increasing journalistic autonomy, Chinese journalism shares some similarities with journalism in the West in its response to internet users. The defensive attitude and strategies of journalists in this case reflect the occupational nature of journalism in needing always to protect its legitimacy. Like journalism elsewhere in the world, the occupational nature of journalism drives Chinese journalists to endeavour to defend and maintain its legitimacy. Chinese journalism is driven to consolidate its position as a legitimate information producer in society. Institutionally-shaped journalistic professional norms and values have been used as criteria to demarcate the distinction between journalists and netizens. In the process, journalists reflect on and reinvent their own work to a certain degree in order to cope with changes in their working environment, which is an essential part of the evolution process of journalism in Chinese society.

Table 1 Journalists' views of netizens and journalism

Images	Meanings
Amateur netizens and unreliable UGC	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Netizens have emancipation potential 2) Netizens are emotional and likely to have emotional outbursts 3) Netizens are angry because of social reality 4) Netizens abhor the powerful but sympathise with the powerless 5) UGC is unreliable and its credibility needs to be checked by journalists 6) UGC as news sources
Professional journalists	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Journalists enjoy authority in checking the credibility of UGC 2) It is journalists' job and responsibility to create trustworthy content and check the credibility of news sources 3) Journalists are guaranteed enough time and financial support to do this 4) Journalists stick to professional values such as objectivity and reporting truths 5) Journalists enjoy advantageous access to authoritative news sources

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¹ It sold 1.845 million copies per day in 2011 with 2.707 million readers in the Zhu River Delta cities (data collected from interviews).

² Accessed on May 1st, 2013, at <http://www.nfmedia.com/cmzi/cmxy/xyji/>

³ Accessed on October 30th, 2013, at <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201307/P020130717505343100851.pdf>

⁴ This case involves a family who refused to vacate their home for real estate developers. The “coolest nail house” received much media attention after being revealed online. See an article “The coolest nail house in history” published by Asia Times, accessed on May 14th, 2013, at

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/IC31Cb01.html

⁵ In this case, a girl who boasted about her wealth online was suspected by netizens to have a scandalous link to the China Red Cross. See a China Daily article “Guo Meimei and the Red Cross scandal”, accessed on May 14th 2013, at

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-07/15/content_12912148.htm

⁶ For example, a blogger published an article, demanding that both the editor-in-chief of *SMD* and the journalist should be sacked, accessed on February 12th, 2012, at http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5b523cc30100dlgh.html

⁷ ‘Human flesh online search’ refers to a phenomenon in which Internet users collectively search for and expose private information of certain people who are suspected to have conducted wrongdoings (Herold, 2011; Cheung, 2009).