

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

Journalism has been seen to change with the changes in society and technological development (Herbert, 2001). Thus, journalists in newspaper, radio and TV have taken the core journalistic values, knowledge and skills and applied them to their distinctive mediums (Harwit, 2001). With the advent of the Internet and the phenomenon of online journalism (McCargo, 2003), there exists an opportunity to study how journalism has adapted to the new medium and the implications for the profession.

China seems to provide an ideal context in which to study online journalism (Winfield and Peng, 2005) as the media reforms in the country have transformed journalism from a 'propaganda tool' to '[serve] two masters: party and masses' (Zhang, 2000:617). In this seemingly contradictory context of vigorous economic activity and continued Communist Party dominance (Lieberthal, 2004), Internet journalism has become an established part of the media landscape and benefits from greater liberalisation of media restrictions than the traditional media (Lee, 2004). The question arises as to what extent those working in the online news have been able to forge a professional identity and exhibit the core journalistic values in the online medium.

Kopper et al (2000:499) argue that despite the potential interest of the Chinese context to researchers, research about online journalism is 'only just beginning'. Most studies of online news sites in China have been commercially motivated (Mengin, 2004) and focussed on evaluating users and their purchasing intentions and power with the intention of attracting advertising (Stafford et al, 2005). The Chinese professional online journalism sector, however, has received little attention. Whilst there has been research into traditional Chinese journalists' opinions of online news (Chan, et al, 2006), there has not been research into the attitudes of professional online journalists themselves to examine how this growing number of media professionals views the possibilities for their profession and how it is impacted on by the current media environment.

As a result of the above factors it was decided that a research project to analyse aspects of online journalism in China would be a useful contribution to the field. Inspired by this evolving or even ‘revolutionary’ field (Lee, 2000:68), questions that arise include the extent to which the online journalists view the online news media as taking over from the traditional media in China (Chan and Leung, 2005). The issue of whether online journalism offers original, credible content or is simply a by-product of the traditional medium with some re-editing performed (Pan et al, 2003; Chan et al, 2006) as viewed by the journalists is also worthy of examination. Similarly, the online journalists’ views of their status and role in society would assist in understanding important aspects of the online news phenomenon in China.

In addition to researching available literature in the field, it was decided to collect original data from online journalists in China about their work and the profession. The sample was chosen from China’s largest commercial online news site, Sina.com (Morgan Stanley China Internet Report, 2005; Sina.com, 2007a). The majority of these journalists have backgrounds in the traditional media and are therefore potentially able to offer interesting perspectives on the different media environments. As the state news sites are often simply online equivalents of their ‘mother medium’ (Donald et al, 2002; Cherian, 2006) and propagate the party line (Zhao,1998; Deibert, 2002; Ho et al, 2003), it was also decided that Sina.com, by virtue of its commercial nature, offered a greater opportunity to explore the wider possibilities offered by the (increasingly) commercial environment.

1.2 Structure

The dissertation is divided into the following chapters: Following Chapter 1, the introduction of the dissertation, the literature review in Chapter 2 provides an overview of the historical development of journalism in China, outlines China’s media reforms and introduces online journalism in China. There is then discussion of online journalism focusing on the four areas on which the research questions are based: the news market in China, the news ‘product’, online news journalism as a profession in China, and the public role of online journalism in Chinese society.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology of this study and offers an accompanying rationale for the design and implementation of the research instruments. The findings from the data, both qualitative and quantitative are presented in Chapter 4. This data will then be classified into the four divisions introduced in the literature review and Chapter 5 will analyse it with reference to the literature from the second chapter.

Finally, Chapter 6 will draw the conclusion that online journalism in China is evolving and maturing as a profession. It will be argued that online journalism increasingly views itself as competing with, though not replacing traditional journalism and Chinese online journalists are now confident about their status and professionalism despite the restrictions they still work under. The journalists also see an important role for online journalism in promoting political democracy and increasing the public sphere, representing a clear departure from the propaganda role of the state news media.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Journalism in China's media reforms

If one wants to study the contemporary situation of online journalism in China, it is necessary to study the history of Chinese media reforms, an area that has attracted a lot of scholarly attention (Zhang, 2000; Lee, 2000). In China, media reforms have involved two contradictory forces: the Party's political control and commercialisation (Lee, 2004). This shows 'a process of uneasy collusion between the party-state authorities and media practitioners in preserving the Party-press system under a market economy' (Zhang 2000:43). As a top official from the State Press and Publication Administration has stated:

No matter how much the managerial mechanisms of the media change, the Party's control over the media, the cadres who manage the media, the ideological direction of the media, and the properties of media organizations will not change. (Su, 2004)

This view insists that the fundamentals of the Party press system remain unchanged during the reforms (Lee, 2004). Others argue that the reforms represent 'a peaceful evolution' from the Party press system to the market-based media system (Zhang, 2000), even though the party continues to control the media. Scholars from different disciplines have discussed changes in China's media reforms; however, the relationship with the economic policy is best demonstrated by providing a 5-stage historical overview. This will take the form of an analysis of the early years of Chinese journalism, the Cultural Revolution, the 'economic reform and openness' era, the WTO period, and the Internet era.

2.1.1 The early years of the Chinese media

In the period following 1949, the mass media was founded as part of the state-controlled economy and used as 'agitator, propagandist, and organizer' (Dai, 1999) by the Chinese Communist Party. As a result, all media served the overall purpose of promoting Party ideology (Zhou, 2001). Radio and newspaper were tightly controlled by propaganda bureaus and served as the 'Party mouthpiece' (Zhang, 2000). The press was obliged to follow the official *Xinhua News Agency* in the coverage of sensitive stories, which led to the saying in Chinese journalism of 'a thousand newspapers with the same face' (Deibert, 2002).

2.1.2 The Cultural Revolution period

The second period, from 1966 to 1976, was the Cultural Revolution period in which Mao Zedong (the first president of the Republic of China) used the media to further his cultural-political ends. The media were ‘unleashed by Mao Zedong’s all-out anti-revolutionary campaigns to weed out capitalist ideas, Confucian, values and artefacts, and feudalistic traditions’ (Chang, 2002:68). During this period, the media were ‘...plagued by the Party’s ultra left guidelines, which were used to fix the general directions of the Cultural Revolution’ (Bi, 2001:426). The mass media were therefore expected to serve no other purpose and function than as Mao’s ‘watchdog’ (Zhang, 2000).

2.1.3 The economic reform and openness period

The third period covers the time from 1978 to China’s entry to the WTO. During this period, the Party’s strategic focus shifted from political campaigns to economic reform and openness, which ‘ushered in a new era of development in all fields of the country,’ (Winfield and Peng, 2005). Advertising revenue became the primary financial source for most Chinese media organizations due to the reduction and gradual termination of state budget allocations (Zhang, 2000).

With this transformation, the public, who are responsible for the lifeline of circulation and advertising revenue for the media (Donald et al, 2002), have more power than usual. As a result, the mass media have begun to change from being the ‘party mouthpiece’ to becoming the voice of both the government and the public (Liu, 2002). During the economic reform and openness era, Chinese journalism also developed to deal with state control and to supply information more in accordance with audience interest (Pan, 2000a) because of ‘...the commercialised media’s need for audience credibility and the commitment of reform-minded professional journalists’ (Zhao, 2000:582).

2.1.4 The WTO period

The fourth period arrived with China’s entry to the World Trade Organization in 2001. The most unique characteristic of the Chinese media industry during this period was the opening of the media market to foreign investment. Based on the

principles of the WTO requirements for the Chinese media industry of ‘fairness, transparency, marketization and relaxation of control ’ (Zhang, 2000), not only do more overseas media conglomerates have the opportunity to invest in the media industry and have their correspondents stationed in China (Liu, 2002), but also the Chinese media organizations have been granted permission to attract capital investment from various sources, such as the stock market, and to enhance their coverage of foreign economic trends (CNNIC, 2000). Meanwhile, it has been argued that the staged opening of the media market has increased the element of competition and commercialization that may further enhance the role of the ‘client’ as opposed to ‘political master’ in the media (Zhang, 2000).

More importantly, quantitative evidence from surveys of Chinese journalists illustrates that the prestigious overseas media outlets ‘serve as professional inspirations and exemplars’ as being closer to their ‘ideal news medium’, while the journalists rate party-organ outlets quite poorly (Pan and Lu, 2003). This supports observations that, in search of new strategies to deal with the state control and the market competition, a ‘professional culture’ has been cultivated among journalists (Pan, 2000b) and professional values have become increasingly important.

2.1.5 The Internet Era

By spreading information and communication technologies (ICTs), the Internet has led the global information revolution. Many countries are still coming to grips with the economic, social, cultural and political implications of this revolution (Allison, 2002). In the case of China, the leadership deem that the Internet is an engine for the development of national knowledge economics. The former Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, explicitly stated that ‘... [the Internet] represents the direction of future development...’ (China’s E-Commerce Development 2000, cited in Dai, 2003:38). This was echoed by the Science and Technology Minister, who stated that the Internet can ‘...develop an information infrastructure that can play a pivotal role in economic development strategies in the new century’ (Afele, 2003:88).

Since the mid-1990s, the Chinese government has invested heavily in 'infrastructure and in promoting Internet use among its government agencies, in business, and among its citizens' (Tai, 2006:156). This period has witnessed the birth and rise of major portal sites in China, such as Sina.com, which was the first 'pure' China-concept Internet media and services company for Chinese communities worldwide (Jeffrey, 2000). It offers online news, entertainment, and community and e-commerce services, and it remains the most visited online destination in China (eMarketer, 2007;Sina.com, 2007).

At the same time, multinationals from countries worldwide have seized the opportunity to become involved in such a fast-expanding market. Examples include eBay, the biggest global online auction company, and the global online retailer giant Amazon.com Inc. The global leading search engines Google and Yahoo, are also both vigorously promoting their presence in the Chinese Internet market (Morgan Stanley China Internet Report, 2005). By incorporating cutting-edge technologies and attracting foreign venture capital into the market, China's Internet sector has seen a staggering growth rate in three of five-core areas and by 2013 is expected to be the world leader in all core areas (Li, 2007).

Whilst promoting the development of ICTs to harness their potential, the government has encouraged their use as a personal communication tool (Xu, 2005). However, to maintain the party's ideology role, it has repeatedly introduced restrictive measures ranging from access control to content filters (Dai, 2003). Whether the goals of decentralizing decision-making and introducing increased liberalization and commercialization of the media are consistent with such restrictive practices in the long term remains to be seen.

All in all, even though it has been suggested that during the media reform period, the media reforms 'do not constitute a coherent project with a clearly defined destination' (Zhang, 2000:165), and the media change instead is a process filled with 'contradictions and ambiguities' (Lee, 2004:186), we can still conclude the main rationale for each media reform period: the need for propaganda (the Cultural Revolution period), policy transition (The economic reform and openness

period), foreign investment (the WTO period) and the new technology development (The Internet era). In addition, the Chinese authority has shifted ‘from propaganda to hegemony’ (Weber, 2002). As a result of the marketization effect in the reform era, media organizations are seen to be moving towards a subtle loosening of political controls (Lee, 2000).

To conclude, though some have suggested that the Party press system has not changed (Lee 2004), others have argued that there is an emerging market press system (Zhang, 2000). It seems clear that the media have gained some financial and operational autonomy in the party press system and market system (see figure 1 below). Therefore, we might expect that the news audience will assume greater importance in directing the future direction of the media (Pan and Lu, 2003). However, despite this reorientation, the party still controls the media.

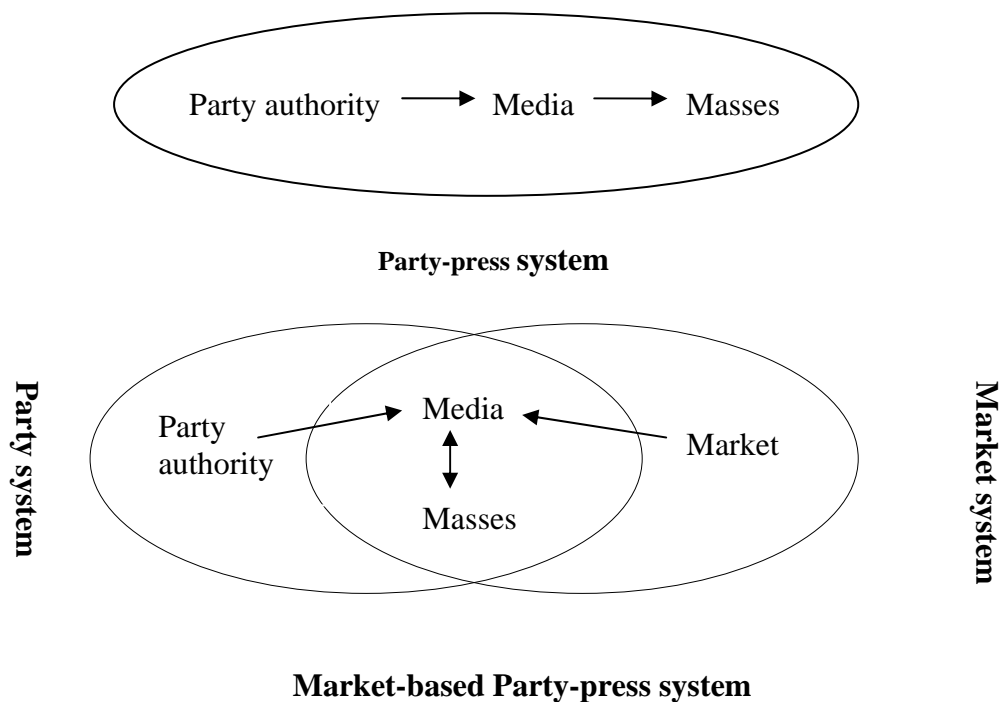


Figure 1: The shift of the media system in China. Based on Zhang (2000:630)

2.2 Online journalism

2.2.1 Definition of online journalism

At its simplest, journalism is ‘paid writing (and the audiovisual equivalent) for public media with reference to actual and ongoing events of public relevance’ (McQuail, 2000:282). Schudson (2002:168) similarly interprets the term as ‘the most succinct term we have for the activity of gathering and disseminating news.’ Yet, in recognition of commercial targeting of specific audiences, we might add that journalism also seems to involve ‘identifying events, facts, experiences or opinions that may be of interest to [the] readership’ (Ward, 2002:341).

Definitions will inevitably differ as they are viewed through the diverse academic lenses of sociology, political science and commercial analysis (Singer, 1998), but, journalists’ own discussions of their work often reveals that a ‘news sense’ is considered an essential quality (Zelizer, 2004). In addition, questions of public service feature heavily in description of their role, including ‘a responsibility for the news’ (Dimmick et al, 2000).

As Ward (2002) argues, the term *journalism* also demonstrates the characteristic of being ‘particularly responsive to social and technological change’. Furthermore, it can be argued that the definition of journalism will also change ‘as the institution and concept of journalism change’ (Pearson, 1999). Such circumstances could be considered to be present with the introduction of the Internet, as Dahlgren explains:

Journalism is carried out in specific institutional circumstances, within concrete organizational settings and under particular technological conditions. The advent of cyberspace will inevitably impact on the factors which shape how journalism gets done and may well even colour how we define what journalism is. (Dahlgren 1996, cited in Deuze 2003:5)

The phenomenon of ‘online journalism’ can be defined as ‘the use of digital technologies to research, produce, and deliver (or make accessible) news and information to an increasingly computer-literate audience’ (Barnhurst, cited in Deuze 1999:378). It is in this light that we can investigate the implications that the Internet has for journalism. It can be seen, for example, that within the space

of a short period, the Internet established itself as an essential part of the journalistic process owing to its role in gathering and disseminating information (Deuze, 2003). Computer Assisted Reporting is now a feature of all modern newsrooms (Deuze, 1999) and there are an increasing number of online news sites taking advantage of the multi-media possibilities of the new medium, whether these are associated with a traditional media 'mother' (Cherian, 2006) or exist purely in an online format, such as in the case of Sina.com in China.

Consequently, online journalism introduces not just new practices and a need for new skills (Hall, 2001), but has major implications for the fundamental functions and qualities of journalism (Harcup, 2004). Using academic research on the impact of online journalism (Ho et al, 2003; Kopper et al, 2000) as well as research on the unique Chinese context itself (Damm and Thomas, 2006; Tai, 2006) this dissertation aims to investigate the subject further by researching four main areas which will facilitate a better understanding of the implications of this phenomenon for journalism: the market, the product, the profession and the public role.

2.2.2 Classified categories

2.2.2.1 Market Review

In order to attain an overview of the market, it is necessary to determine the Internet 'population' (Kopper et al, 2000). According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) figures of June 2007, China boasts the second largest Internet user population in the world at 162 million (the USA had a recorded 211 million). Compared with the figures from December 2006 (see figure 2 below), that represents an additional 25 million new users. Moreover, the CCNIC (2007) estimate that the number of users in China will increase even more rapidly in the next three or five years.

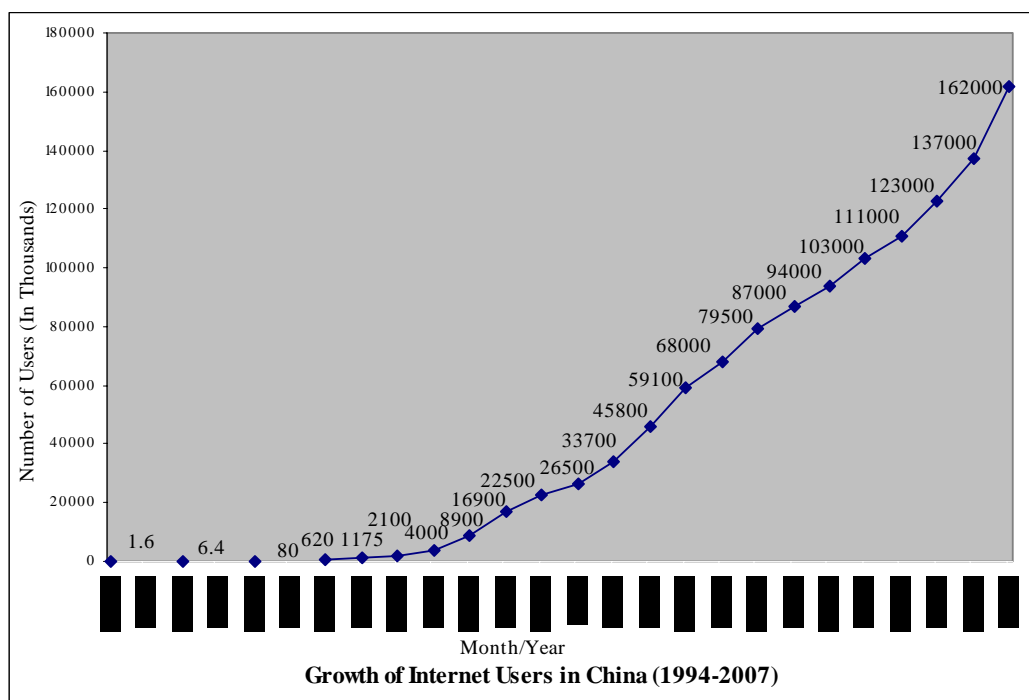


Figure 2: Growth of Internet user in China (1994-2007) based on the CNNIC Semi-Annual Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China (1994-2007)

With the increasing number of users, advertising investment in the new media in China has increased exponentially (eMarketer, 2007). What is more, the empowering aspects of the Internet, which provides many services previously offered by other media (Afele, 2003), have led some commentators to argue that the Internet may make the traditional media completely redundant (Cohen, 2002).

On the one hand, the media ‘displacement hypothesis’ (Krugman, 1985, cited in Allan 2005) suggests that existing media use patterns will be ‘restructured’ with the introduction of a new medium. In support of this theory, Jeffrey (2000) notes that the ‘amount of time spent on electronic bulletin boards significantly reduces the time spent on other media activities’. In addition, Kalathil and Boas (2001) affirm that the ‘amount of time spent on watching television, talking on the telephone and reading newspapers decreases as a result of using online media’.

However, some scholars suggest the ‘supplement’ or ‘activation’ model (Lee, 2000; McNair, 1998) in place of the displacement model. Lee (2000) considers that online media are a ‘supplement’ to traditional media instead of a ‘complement or displacement mechanism’. Other studies also support the view that the use of new media is unrelated to the traditional media (McNair, 1998; Pearson, 1999).

According to a 2005 survey ‘Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Five Chinese Cities’ produced by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Research Center for Social Development (CASS), 78.4 percent of Internet users regarded the Internet as their major information source, surpassing the role of television and newspaper as an information source (73.7 percent indicated that TV was a major information source, and 71.4 percent chose newspapers). The significance of this is that the Internet was chosen not only as an important information tool, but also as the first choice, with many respondents arguing that the Internet is the fastest information tool (Guo, 2005).

A number of limitations to the growth of the online media’s share of the media market have been highlighted by research in the areas of content credibility (Chan et al, 2006), lifestyle (Chan and Leung, 2005) and generational factors of the Internet (Jakes, 2003). Among these elements, hardware limitation is cited as being the main limiting factor for development of the Internet in China (Damm and Thomas, 2006). This is despite the fact that the Chinese government has invested heavily in the area (Tai, 2006) and the CCNIC (2007) report that the number of users in China is expected to increase rapidly in coming years as Internet resources become available in more rural areas.

Some scholars consider the percentage of Chinese citizens enjoying Internet connectivity to still be low at about 12.3% (Anderson, 2007). In particular, the digital divide between rural and urban areas still proves to be a big hindrance to the development of the Internet in China (Zhou, 2006). This gap can be seen in the fact (CNNIC, 2007) that in 2006, 21.6% of urban citizens were able to connect to the Internet, while just 5.1% of rural citizens could enjoy the service.

In summary, it seems that commentators are divided on the question of the replacement of the traditional media. It would, however, appear that owing to the explosive development of the Internet, the new media have become 'ordinary' (Jeffrey, 2000) or even 'mainstream' (Lievrouw, 2004) in people's everyday lives. In the case of China, it could be argued that the Internet is increasingly a primary source of the news, but that at the moment it continues to supplement the traditional media rather than replacing it, largely, though not exclusively, because limits to accessibility still exist.

2.2.2.2 Product Review

It is evident that the Internet is a very useful tool in news production (Pavlik, 2001) by providing convenient access to a wider range of international resources and a platform for journalists to interact effectively with readers. However, some studies show that attitudes towards the Internet are not always favourable. Traditional journalists in the USA and China, for example, have drawn into question the originality and credibility of the content (Garrison, 2000; Chan et al, 2006). A number of studies suggest that this is due to the perception of an 'anything goes' mode of generating content for websites (Hall, 2001) and the belief that a constant 24-hour deadline inevitably results in a lack of news gate keeping (Deuze and Yeshua, 2000).

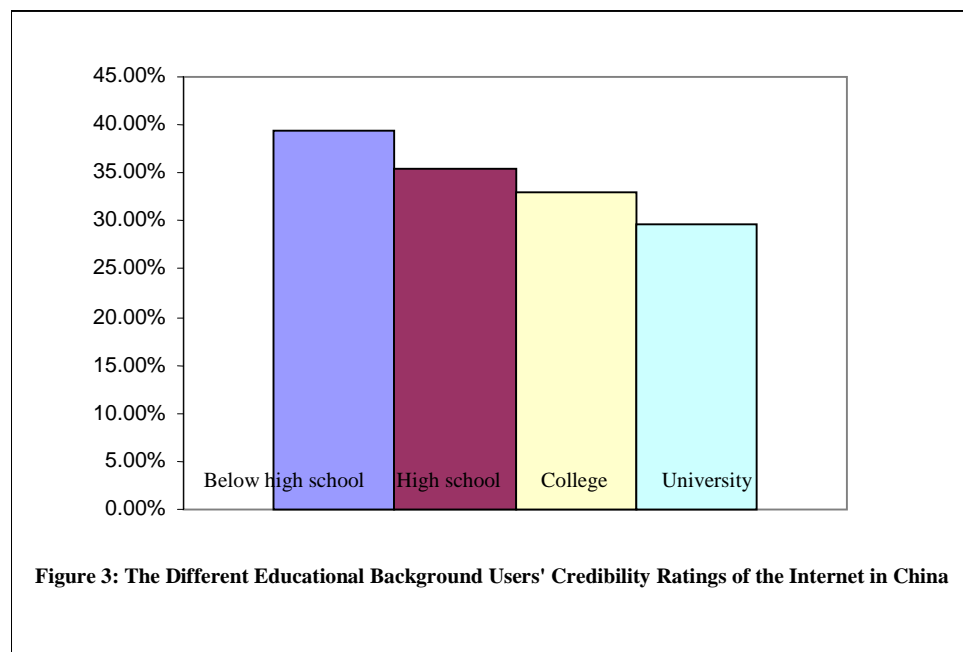
Deuze (1999:374) argues that 'originality' in the context of online journalism means 'produced exclusively for the online news site'. According to a survey by Steven Ross and Don Middleberg (cited in Deuze, 1999:374), when the news websites provide original content instead of 'shovelware' recycling of the content of traditional media, it is regarded as 'an example of a news site doing a good job'.

In the Chinese context, in the late 1990s, commercial portals such as Sina.com began the online news service and not only offered domestic and international news, but also chat rooms for political topics (Bi, 2000). However, in 2000, the Chinese State Council adopted an official policy paper entitled the 'Temporary Ordinance on the Management of Internet News Publishing' (CNNIC, 2000), which required that the commercial websites 'only publish news from officially

approved news sources'. The main intention was that these online news media would not be allowed to engage in news collection.

This had the effect of the commercial news media being forced to become 'news aggregators, passing on news from officially approved outlets' (Chan et al, 2006:930). In addition, as discussed in the section on media reforms in China, Chinese online journalists still have to work under the party press system (Zhang, 2000), with the result that some observers consider that the online journalists in China cannot be free to offer original contents (Chan 2006).

The credibility of online news can be seen as being central to how that news is viewed as a product. A useful survey (see figure 3 below) of the credibility of online Chinese news by CNNIC (2007) revealed that the higher the educational level of the users, the lower the confidence they had in the credibility of the content. For example, almost two fifths (39.3%) who were below high school age trusted the Internet content, whereas this figure was less than a third (29.6%) for users with a university degree.



Research in this area also shows that Chinese journalists give higher credibility ratings to the news sites by traditional media outlets than the sites by online commercial companies (Chan et al, 2006). This result is consistent with similar observations from the USA, where journalists in the traditional media also rate commercial company's news as significantly less credible than the mainstream media websites (Bucy, 2003). Whether there is a strong basis for these attitudes in the Chinese context, particularly in the light of Party control of state news sites, is one of the areas that this dissertation research will explore.

The interactivity of a news site is another important aspect of what it has to offer and is one of the most prominent features which distinguish online media from traditional media (Kopper et al, 2000). Jonathan Steuer (1992:84) defines interactivity as '...the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time'. For an online news site, the opportunity to include blogs and links for readers' comments to expedite communications between user and news site represents a significant development that challenges the 'whole premise of the journalist as gatekeeper and information provider' (Ward, 2002:25).

As Dahlgren (cited in Dezue, 2003) similarly argues, greater interactivity offers the audience choice in selecting the media content they want. Hypertextuality serves as an example of the different relationship possible between the journalist and the consumer (Ward, 2002). By offering links to additional sources of comment and archives, the journalist encourages the consumer to pursue his or her own 'investigations of the subject' and take responsibility for the selection of content (Anderson, 2007).

2.2.2.3 Profession Review

It has been suggested that, with a vast array of resources and technological possibilities to work with (Hall, 2001), the online medium produces profound differences between the work of online journalists and more traditional journalism. This has led writers such as Meek (2000) to argue that online journalists are viewed as 'a breed apart.' However, many online journalists have made a transition from the traditional media to the new medium and the implications of

this are also explored in this dissertation. One of the central questions which arise regarding online journalists is whether they require the traditional journalistic skills or whether the change of medium makes some of them redundant and introduces the need for other, technological, skills (Kopper et al, 2000; Hall, 2001).

Herbert (2000:278) identifies a number of key characteristics required of a journalist, namely 'a broad scope of basic knowledge'; 'professional reporting and writing ability'; and 'independent thinking and sense of judgment.' According to some surveys among journalists (Scholl, 1997; Deuze 1998a, cited in Deuze, 1999: 376), the online journalist is 'first and foremost a journalist', that is, 'a media professional earning at least half his or her monthly income as a journalist working in the context of a newsroom within a media organization'. Moreover, this involves performing at least one of four selected journalistic 'core' activities: newsgathering, selecting, writing/processing or editing.

Therefore, Deuze (1999:377) concludes that 'the online journalist is a professional performing journalistic tasks within and for an online publication'. The online medium, however, clearly makes different demands on online journalists who need to be 'more broadly skilled and, especially for titles with global readerships, willing to accommodate a full 24-hour news cycle' (Hall, 2001:86). This shift can require some adaptation and can involve journalists not only in writing stories, but manipulating images, using audio and video.

Very different perspectives on the role are offered by a comparison of views from the BBC and AOL. Describing the relocation of journalists from different BBC divisions to an online context, Allan (2006:36) states the view held at the time that '...it is easier to teach old media journalists new tools than to teach techies journalism'. Online journalists were expected to be 'multi-skilled' and to 'package their stories up to and be involved in the post-production stage' (Allan, 2006:37). In contrast, Steve Case, the chief executive officer of AOL, says that his organization does not hire journalists because it views itself as a 'news packaging' rather than a 'news-gathering' organization (Hall, 2001:25).

From the online journalists' perspective, a study of 515 full-time journalists by Pan and Chan (2003:676) found that on a 5-point scale in which 5 means 'extremely important', 'training in using computers' in reporting was regarded as 3.54, whilst the professional skill of 'reporting, writing and editing' was 4.04. It can be seen that both are regarded as central to the demands of the profession, though the technological skills are not quite as highly valued. To put this into perspective, however, it is worth noting that journalists are not always expected to use technological skills, but they should be able to 'conceptualise a piece of journalism in multimedia and interactive terms' (Hall, 2001:91).

2.2.2.4 Public role review

In western countries, the free press system is considered to be 'vital for the formation of public opinion from rational, critical debates' (Tai, 2006). However, in China, the Communist Party holds tight control on the mass media. Indeed, even after several media reforms in China, the media are often still regarded as the 'mouthpiece of the party' (Lee, 2000) and serve as mass mobilization tools to 'guide public opinion' to support Party policies, and to 'conduct positive propaganda for Party ideologies' (Dai, 1999).

The way that the media in the state-controlled Chinese context play a totally different set of roles in shaping and reflecting public opinion than their counterparts in the western independent press systems can be seen in the comments of the current Chinese president, Hu Jintao, at a national propaganda and ideological work conference:

Journalistic work should firmly adhere to a correct orientation in guiding public opinion; uphold the principle of unity, stability, boosting morale, and mainly positive propaganda; play up the theme of the times; and cultivate and develop a positive and healthy mainstream public opinion throughout society. (Tai 2006: 193)

This view is exemplified by the fact that as recently as August 18th, 2007, the Guardian newspaper carried a story entitled '*All news must be good news says Chinese government*' reporting that the Chinese domestic media have been banned from conducting independent investigations of food and product safety

stories and are not to include any mention of the inconvenience to commuters of the air-pollution control measures in the capital (Watts, 2007). Interestingly, however, Sina.com (Sina.com, 2007b) did then carry further coverage of the recall of Mattel toys, suggesting that there is some room for the commercial online media to manoeuvre.

The general description given of state control is far from many of the ideals that have been described as being at the heart of journalism in literature on the functions of journalism (Zhao, 2000). Commentators such as De Burgh (2003) and Hachigian (2001), for example, regard the expansion of the public sphere and the opportunity presented for dialogue as being goals of the free expression principle of journalism. Clearly, this can also take the form of pressure for social change and, in some situations, pressure for greater political democracy (Harwit and Clark, 2001).

Belief in the potential as a tool for democratization and broader participation of the public has been strong since the mid-1990s (Hall, 2001). By enabling more people to participate in a public discourse, it was believed that the medium would be empowering. To a significant extent, cyberspace has become a public forum for unrestricted political discussions, with Herbert (2001) estimating that 5–10 percent of Usenet messages are politically oriented, but restrictions on political news in the Chinese media are very much in force.

The notion of ‘the fourth estate’ is also frequently invoked when talking about the media – particularly in the US context (Pan and Lu, 2003). This monitoring of government and making it accountable for its actions forms part of a view that ‘...the public dimensions of what [journalists] do are critical to a definition of their own work as journalists’ (Harcup, 2004). The high value placed on freedom of expression is seen to frequently imply a role for journalism as a ‘public mobiliser’ pressing for social change (Weaver and Wilhoit, cited in Pan and Chan, 2003:655).

If we look specifically at government control of the Internet, however, China made clear its intention to control the medium from the outset. A decree on

December 8th 1997, for example, forbade ‘any units or individuals from using the Internet to create, replicate, retrieve, or transmit information that is harmful, subversive, obscene, or damaging to the state or state organs’ (Tai, 2006:98). In 2000, under a new decree, all Internet content providers (ICPs) were then obliged to obtain a license from the provincial authorities. Furthermore, in 2005, the Internet law stipulated that news sites publishing stories from sources other than their own were required to obtain approval (Ibid: 99).

Even so, the State Council Information Office regarded Internet news sites as receiving preferential treatment to the traditional media as shown in the comments of its Head of the Internet Bureau, Qian Xiaoqian:

We plan to adopt policies towards Internet media that are preferential and more lenient than those for traditional media. There is a great difference between traditional media and Internet media, so it’s not possible to apply the past methods of managing traditional media to the Internet.

(Kuhn, 2001)

To a certain extent, this may allow the Internet media a more flexible approach in covering major new events (Tai, 2006). However, the Internet continues to be heavily controlled and the indications are that the authoritarian state will continue its long-term efforts to control information in the country, either online or offline (Zhou, 2006). The Ministry of Public Security in 2000, for example, was already employing an Internet police force of 300,000 to ‘administrate and maintain order on computer networks’ (Thomas, 2001) and this figure has continued to increase significantly.

In conclusion, the diffusion rate of the Internet in China is still low (CNNIC, 2007), but with the increasing popularization of the Internet as a communication tool among ordinary Chinese citizens in the years to come, there is reason to believe that online journalism will contribute greatly to the expanding social space on the Internet (Kopper et al, 2000). Where online journalists regard themselves as having a social responsibility to act as the ‘fourth estate’ and to press for social change and freedom of expression, the boundaries of government control and the scope for this active role will be tested.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1 Description of the groups involved in the investigation

3.1.1 Questionnaire respondents

Questionnaires were administered to online editors from Sina.com, which is the largest commercial online news website in China. The sample was organised to include online journalists from five of the largest Chinese cities, with 7 of them working in Beijing, 5 in Shanghai, 5 in Guanzhou, 5 in Shenzhen and another 5 from Chongqing. Each of these of these cities has main Sina.com offices and is included in order for the research to be geographically representative and to reflect the places where the Internet historically rose as a news medium at that historical juncture in the country's media reforms.

Another central factor in the choice of sample was that many of the journalists have had experience as traditional journalists, enabling comparisons to be made between online journalism and non-online journalism. A further consideration was that the journalists should have been working in online journalism for at least two years. This criterion was introduced in the expectation that respondents would then be better placed to discuss some of the issues related to their profession.

Contacts within Sina.com were used in order to encourage the online journalists to complete the final version of the questionnaire. In total, 27 completed questionnaires were collected, providing a significant amount of data for the research. The online editors themselves had an average age of 26.5 and in terms of educational background, 7 had a college education (3 years), 19 had bachelor degrees, and one had a Master's level qualification.

3.1.2 Interview respondent

An interview was conducted with a chief editor from Sina.com with responsibilities at a national level. This person has over ten years' professional experience working as a journalist, firstly in the traditional media and then in an online context. Owing to his senior position, he is well-placed to comment on developments globally and the strategic direction of Sina.com, which should provide useful managerial insights into the issues that emerge from the questionnaire data.

3.2 Description of research instruments

The research contains both library-based and empirical research. The library research will provide a background to online journalism and the media system in China with an emphasis on market analysis, product analysis, occupational changes and the public role of online journalists. Data on these issues from the perspectives of those working in the field will then be collected through both the questionnaire and interview research instruments.

3.2.1 Questionnaires

3.2.1.1 Rationale for questionnaires

Questionnaires facilitate the collection of data from a substantial sample of online media professionals where this might not otherwise be possible. This factor is significant as it is important that the data be as representative as possible of the online journalism profession. For quantitative data, questionnaires not only offer the convenience of respondents being able to choose from given options in closed questions, but they also allow respondents to fully consider their responses without the pressure of being in an interview situation.

Electronic questionnaires also overcome the logistics of dealing with large distances. As data was to be collected from the different Sina.com regional offices, this was a necessary consideration. It was also felt that online professionals would be more willing to complete the questionnaires in a digital format since they are accustomed to working quickly and efficiently in this medium. This convenience could therefore be hoped to translate into a reasonably high return rate.

3.2.1.2 Design of questionnaires

Central considerations in the design of the questionnaires were that the questionnaires should not be too time-consuming or onerous to complete. All the respondents were busy professionals who could not be expected to spend a long time deliberating abstract questions or dealing with a long list of questions. To this end, it was decided that the majority of the questionnaires would be closed-ended and there would be only 16 questions in total. Furthermore, to make the questionnaire more user-friendly, the format for these closed-ended questions was

standardised as far as possible, with respondents being asked to choose the degree to which they agreed with given statements.

Clearly, this research also needs to include open-ended questions to facilitate qualitative data and allow respondents' reasoning and additional issues to be identified. To this end, five of the questions were open-ended. As with the other questions, care was taken to ensure that the wording was unambiguous; that it did not lead the respondents towards certain answers; and that the questions provided enough breadth for respondents to provide information that might not have been anticipated by the researcher.

The questionnaires were translated into Chinese owing to the sample profile and were then originally put online using a professional software service specifically designed to allow respondents to access and complete the questionnaire online. This system potentially offers the advantages that it is only necessary to send a hyperlink to the respondents (instead of an attachment) and respondents do not have to send an email reply to the researcher with the questionnaire attached; they simply complete the questionnaire online. In addition, the software automatically provides a breakdown of all the responses and thus it was anticipated that it would be labour-saving in terms of the quantitative analysis.

3.2.1.3 Piloting of questionnaires

To evaluate the questionnaire design, a piloting process was organised with five respondents from Sina.com. They were each sent the hyperlink for the online questionnaire and agreed to complete it as part of a trailing process. The piloting revealed significant obstacles to the collection of data using this method. Firstly, not all the respondents were able to access the site, prompting concerns that online restrictions could be preventing access. For the data that was collected online, there were then concerns about the reliability of the software and of access to reliable results. In addition, pilot respondents expressed the view that other respondents may not respond so favourably to an online questionnaire owing to the plethora of such questionnaires on the Internet.

It was decided that rather than take the risk of the data collection not being successful for any of the above reasons, the questionnaires would be sent to individual respondents as an attachment via contacts in the main Sina.com offices. The same contact would then send the batch of completed questionnaires back in electronic form to the researcher. Changes were also made to the wordings of two of the questions for clarity where respondents had interpreted them differently or expressed reservations about their understanding of the information requested.

3.2.1.4 Questionnaire Questions

For each of the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 a number of questionnaire questions were required to explore the related issues. In order for the relevance of the questionnaire questions to be clear, the research questions and their corresponding questionnaire questions are listed below:

Research Question One (market): *To what extent is online journalism competing with traditional journalism?*

QQ1. To what extent do you think online journalism has taken over the functions of the traditional media in China

QQ2a. To what extent do you agree that online journalism will make the traditional media completely redundant in the future?

QQ2b. Why?

Research Question Two (product): *How important is interactivity in online journalism?*

QQ3. To what extent do you think the following interactive functions should be used in online journalism?

- a) Hyperlinks to external content b) Reader blogs c) Databases of archive material
d) Reader comments to editors

Research Question Three (product): *What are the limitations of online journalism and how can these be overcome?*

QQ4a. Compared with the traditional media, what do you think are the limitations of online journalism?

QQ4b. What can be done to overcome these limitations?

Research Question Four (product): *How does online journalism differ from traditional journalism?*

QQ5. To what extent do you think online journalism creates *original* news material?

QQ6. How important do you think *original* news material is to online journalism?

QQ7. To what extent do you think the following have been negatively affected as a result of online journalism?

- a) Choice of relevant content b) Depth of analysis c) Verification of facts
d) Originality of content e) Accuracy

Research Question Five (profession): *What skills online journalists need?*
QQ8a. What is your career background?
QQ8b. How easy a transition do you think it is from the traditional media to online journalism?
QQ8c. Why?
QQ9. What skills and attitudes do you think are necessary for an online journalist?

Research Question Six (profession): *What is the status of online journalists in China?*
QQ10a. To what extent do you agree that the status of online journalists is lower than that of those in the traditional media QQ10b. Why?

Research Question Seven (public role): *What role should online journalism play in society?*
QQ11. To what extent is government control of online journalism?
QQ12. To what extent should online journalism have the following functions in society?
a) To create public dialogue b) To monitor government c) To press for social change
d) To promote political democracy

3.2.2 Interview

3.2.2.1 Rationale for interview

As previously mentioned, questionnaires were chosen as they provide a sizeable sample for analysis. However, to explore issues more fully and allow the researcher to probe responses, interviews can be more appropriate for collecting qualitative data. This interview data can ‘...put flesh on the bones of questionnaire responses’ (Bell 1993:91) and result in greater understanding of the underlying issues. Moreover, the researcher had access to a senior editor at Sina.com with policy-level responsibilities within the commercial news association and it was felt that an interview would allow for more far-ranging and insightful data to be obtained.

3.2.2.2 Design of interview

A semi-structured interview was chosen as it offers the flexibility of the researcher being able to respond to the contributions of the interviewee whilst ensuring that the main research questions are answered. Care was taken not to design questions in such a way that would ‘lead the witness’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:12) and the interview questions were sent to the interviewee by email prior to the interview so that he could begin to reflect on them.

A pilot interview was held with one of the Sina.com journalists in preparation for the actual interview. It transpired that more time would be needed to put the interviewee at ease prior to the telephone interview, particularly taking into consideration the lack of face-to-face contact and the fact that it was being recorded. In addition, technical difficulties in the recording process were overcome to ensure that the interview recordings were of a quality would make accurate transcription possible.

3.2.2.3 Interview Questions

The interview questions can be grouped into four main areas: market, product, occupation and public role. The questions given to the interviewee are as follow:

Market

Question 1: To what extent do you agree that new media will make the traditional media completely redundant in the sense of market?

Product

Question 2a: According to the law in 2000 'Internet content providers can only carry news stories from the officially sanctioned news media,' so, what are the main information sources for online journalism in China?

Question 2b: If online journalism has to adapt the news from the traditional media, the official sanctioned news media, and the users, to what extent is the content of online news sites original and credible?

Occupation

Question 3: As a chief editor, you have worked for both the traditional media and the online media. What are the main differences? What kind of background do you look for in the staff you hire for the new media: traditional journalists or staff with computer skills?

Public Role

Question 4: To what extent is there government control of content of online journalism? How does this affect the role of online news sites in society?

3.3 Research protocol

In keeping with research protocol, permission was sought for the data collection to take place and all participants were made fully aware of the purpose of the study and given assurances that information collected would only be used for assist in this dissertation research. Respondents were also guaranteed anonymity and informed that any quotations used, reference would not make the journalist identifiable. This was felt to be of particular importance given the potentially sensitive nature of some of the questions, especially in the last section.

Chapter Four: Findings from Data

4.1 Findings

The quantitative data is presented here in table form with accompanying descriptions emphasizing significant patterns in the data. The qualitative data is presented as a summary of the significant findings, with some quantification included where this is useful. The data is organized by research question.

4.1.1 Market

Question 1: To what extent do you think online journalism has taken over the functions of the traditional media in China?

Response	Respondents
None	4
A little	0
Quite a lot	15
A lot	8
Total	27

The data shows that the vast majority of respondents (85%) believe that online journalism has significantly taken over the functions of the traditional media, with 30% of these stating that it has happened to a large extent. Only 15% think that the functions of the traditional media in China have not been affected. The interviewee explains this phenomenon as resulting from the fact that the Internet duplicates the functions of the other media: '[The Internet] can offer almost every type of content which traditional media can offer, for example, we can read news, watch TV, listen to music and even shop online.'

Question 2a: To what extent do you agree that online journalism will make the traditional media completely redundant in the future?

Response	Respondents
Strongly agree	0
Agree	6
Neither agree nor disagree	2
Disagree	15
Strongly disagree	4
Total	27

The findings reveal that the respondents tend to believe that traditional journalism will not be made completely redundant in the future. Thus, whilst just over a fifth (22%) agree with the statement, 70% either disagree or disagree strongly. This strongly indicates that the journalists view limits to the impact that online journalism will have on the traditional media, believing that the latter will continue to have a role to play, despite the growth in online journalism. It also coincides with the view of the interviewee, who argues that despite the fact that growing interest in the medium has resulted in a huge increase in the advertising revenue of Sina.com (figures in June 2007 showed a 40% increase over the previous year), the traditional media will remain.

Question 2b: Why?

Arguments put forward to support the replacement of the traditional media tend to focus on the fact that it offers the benefits of the other media combined. However, those who see the traditional media surviving provide a variety of arguments to support their views. One of these refers to audience preferences. Respondent T, for example, argues that ‘... online media and traditional media both have different audiences; older people prefer reading newspapers to getting news online.’ In addition, the interviewee views Internet penetration as being an obstacle to online journalism, arguing that only in large cities is computer literacy high.

Interestingly, one respondent (M) believes that ‘...people prefer and trust the information offered by the traditional media’, suggesting different audience perceptions about the quality of online and traditional journalism. Similarly, respondent F refers to the ‘flood’ of online information as a disincentive for online news sources.

A different argument put forward for the limits to the advancement of online journalism is succinctly expressed by respondent G:

Online journalists now have no right to interview other people according to the law in China. Most contents still depend on the traditional media.

Thus, the respondent sees a clear division in the role of online journalism and traditional journalism, suggesting that online journalists are restricted from creating original stories based on their own interviews and are therefore dependent, to an extent, on the traditional media for content.

This is qualified, however, by the interviewee, who states that it is only political news that cannot be gained first hand. Entertainment news, business news and sports news can still be obtained through interview. A process of ‘hitting line balls’ is described to explain the lengths the commercial online news site must go to for restrictions to be circumvented.

4.1.2 Product

Question 3: To what extent do you think the following interactive functions should be used in online journalism?

<i>Interactive Functions</i>	Hyperlinks to external content	Reader blogs	Databases of archive material	Reader comments to editors
Response				
None	0	0	0	0
A little	9	10	3	5
Quite a lot	6	10	5	4
A lot	12	7	19	18
Total	27	27	27	27

The response to the questions about the need for interactivity in online journalism overall suggested a strong belief amongst journalists that interactivity is an important aspect of the medium. There were no responses suggesting that one of the functions should not be present and overall three fifths of the respondents felt strongly that the individual functions should be incorporated. The inclusion of hyperlinks, for example, was regarded as quite important or very important by two thirds of the respondents, reader blogs were similarly seen as quite or very useful by 62% of respondents.

The use of databases of archive material was the highest scoring, with over two thirds choosing ‘a lot’ and nearly 90% choosing either this or ‘quite a lot’. The opportunity for reader comments to editors to be facilitated was also a popular choice, with two thirds of the respondents thinking that it should be used a lot.

The interviewee insightfully notes that:

[Online journalism] makes it easier for us to provide readers with access to primary source materials, to solicit feedback and discussion, and to integrate text, audio and video.

Question 4a: Compared with the traditional media, what do you think are the limitations of online journalism?

Four of the respondents referred to hardware limitations of online journalism. They identify the lack of access to the Internet and low computer literacy amongst some sectors of the population as limitations to the role that online journalism currently plays:

We assume that everyone can use the Internet, but that's because we are in a professional urban environment. Older people and those in the countryside are often not computer literate. (Respondent J)

Other respondents referred to the fact that there is little control over the information which is put online and the accompanying scepticism that some users have over the quality of the contents. Respondent M notes that '...anyone can put something online', a view which is shared by Respondent T, who states that '...people don't know what they can and can't trust on the Net generally and this affects online journalism as well.'

Regarding the degree of originality of online news material, the interviewee states that the content originates not only from recycling of information from the traditional media, but includes information obtained directly by journalists on non-controversial areas and content from users in the form of the site's reader blogs and comments to the editor. On this point, it is claimed that '...much of the entertainment and sports news used by the traditional media in China is actually taken from the work of online journalists.'

Interestingly, one respondent (T) regards lack of information of the online medium as a limitation to its development. He argues that '...while the Internet itself is accessible to almost everyone, knowledge about it, its users, contents, and effects is not.' This suggests that the medium's potential has not been realized as there is a lack of systematic study as to how it can be utilized.

4b. What can be done to overcome these limitations?

Regarding hardware limitations, respondents referred to a need for the Internet to be popularized and for the government to invest in developing a more Internet-based society. As respondent G argues: ‘The whole society needs to improve the development of the Internet environment and the government should help that process.’

In response to the problems of trust of content, two respondents (M and T) suggest greater degrees of accountability by news sites for material on the Net. The interviewee similarly believes that credibility is gained through consistent standards and cites the fact that Sina.com’s news is checked from 3 different sources to ensure a quality control that the public learn to value. In the same way, in the case of information accepted from readers through the blogs or comments to the editor, ‘...experienced senior editors exercise their professional judgement about the trustworthiness of the material’ (Interviewee).

Regarding the lack of original content, the four respondents who mentioned the restrictions on interviews all commented that a lifting of these restrictions would create new possibilities for online journalism to offer something new. As respondent L puts it: ‘Many [online journalists] have strong traditional journalistic backgrounds and are able to bring more to online journalism than [they] do at the moment.’

Question 5: To what extent do you think online journalism creates original news material?

Response	Respondents
None	0
A little	11
Quite a lot	10
A lot	6
Total	27

Almost 60% of the respondents believe that the extent to which online news material is original is ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a lot’. The remaining 40% think that the content is only original to a small extent, with no respondents arguing that there is no original content on the site.

Question 6: How important do you think the original news material is to online journalism?

Response	Respondents
Not important	0
A little important	1
Quite important	11
Very important	15
Total	27

All but one of the respondents believe that having original news material is quite or very important to online journalism. What is more, the majority of those (56%) state that the originality is very important. This suggests a consensus amongst the online journalists that creating original material is fundamental to their work.

Question 7: To what extent do you think the following have been negatively affected as a result of online journalism?

	Choice of relevant content	Depth of analysis	Verification of facts	Originality of content	Accuracy
Response					
None	0	1	1	3	2
A little	5	2	3	7	2
Quite a lot	5	10	6	9	5
A lot	17	14	17	8	18
Total	27	27	27	27	27

According to the respondents, online journalism has had quite a negative effect overall on standards in journalism. 63%, for example, believe that the choice of relevant content has suffered ‘a lot’, with an additional 18% thinking that there has been ‘quite a lot’ of negative impact on the profession.

Similarly, respondents view the depth of analysis as having been negatively affected. Almost 90% think that it has declined either a lot or quite a lot. Similarly, almost two thirds of respondents believe that verification of facts in online journalism signifies a strong negative development, with an additional 22% identifying journalism as having been affected quite a lot.

Accuracy is also viewed as having suffered significantly due to online journalism. Two thirds of respondents think that there has been a strong weakening of accuracy and an extra five respondents see quite a lot of negative change. As the interviewee mentions, Sina.com themselves have strong procedures in place and adopt a professional approach to ensuring accuracy, but the view is that other online news sites may not operate to the same standards.

The originality of content is not viewed as having been affected as badly as other areas, but there is still an overall view that there has been a discernable negative change. Over three fifths of the respondents regard the decline as ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a lot’ and an extra quarter think that there has been ‘a little’ negative change.

4.1.3 Profession

Question 8a: What is your career background?

Response	
Computer	10
Traditional media	15
Others	2
Total	27

The data clearly shows that there are a third more online journalists with a traditional journalistic background than those with an information technology background as there are those with a more traditional journalistic background. This suggests that there has been a policy of choosing employees with journalistic skills over technological skills, though the latter are also valued. This view is corroborated by the interviewee, who argues that ‘...the most important thing is the skill of journalism ... a good sense of news and reporting ability.’

Question 8b: How easy a transition do you think it is from the traditional media to online journalism?

Response	Respondents
Very easy	5
Quite easy	15
Neither easy nor difficult	6
Quite difficult	1
Total	27

The results suggest quite strongly that the transition to online journalism from the traditional media is not regarded as difficult by the respondents. Over two thirds of them regard the transition as either 'very easy' or 'quite easy' and only one of the twenty seven described the change as being 'quite difficult'.

Question 8c: Why?

Of those who regarded the transition as unproblematic, comments tended to focus on the fact that the essential job requirements remained the same. Respondent A typically comments that '...it's the same job with different tools', whilst respondent T states that '...it's still journalism, just in a different environment ... [we] can still use the skills we've learnt in other jobs'. Indeed, many of the respondents identified the additional technical demands as something that could be learnt in-house. Respondent C summarises this position as follows:

It's no big change for us. New staff just need some computer skills training to learn how to do their old jobs online. Most journalists are already computer literate, so they can be expected to pick it up

Of the six respondents who found the changes neither easy nor difficult, the technical demands were seen as being heavier. Respondent V explains that '[online journalists] not only need the professional journalist skills but also need the knowledge about computers, especially Photoshop and Dreamweaver.' Indeed, it would seem that many of the journalists are expected to learn quite complex aspects of the software in a relatively short period.

A distinct feature which respondents mention is the different working environment, with a number of respondents commenting that online journalism is a much busier environment in which to work. Thus, respondent M, who found the change challenging, notes that '...the way of thinking and doing the news is different. 24/7 is too tight for traditional journalists.' Similarly, the interviewee notes that: 'Everyday is the deadline or there is no deadline at all and you have to update the news every day or even every minute.'

Question 9: What skills and attitudes do you think are necessary for an online journalist?

Regarding necessary attributes of an online journalist, just over a quarter (7) of the respondents referred to the need for a solid background in computing, including the ability to deal with audio and images. Respondent S described Photoshop and Dreamweaver as ‘fundamental’ tools of the job. However, a far greater number of respondents (74%) identified the skill of recognizing and dealing with news as being essential. As respondent B put its:

You have to have a sensitive feeling for the news, to understand why things are important and how to present it to your readers

This relationship with the reader is also noted by respondent F who states that a good online journalist ‘...should have good communication with the online audience’. It is an idea that is echoed by respondent T, who believes that journalists should ‘interact’ with the audience and therefore need to have a good understanding of the target audience and an ability to make content appealing.

Other skills that are mentioned include good editorial ability to organize material and the ability to bring a fresh flavour to material through a good writing style with a novel approach and original comments. According to respondent P, it is through putting a new perspective on the news that ‘...something new is created and that’s what we do.’

Question 10a: To what extent do you agree that the status of online journalists is lower than that of those in the traditional media?

Response	Respondents
Agree	0
Neither agree nor disagree	3
Disagree	13
Strongly disagree	11
Total	27

As can be seen above, nearly 90% of the respondents disagree with the statement that the status of online journalists is lower than that of those in the traditional media. What is more, almost half of those strongly disagreed with the suggestion that online journalists do not share the same professional recognition as traditional journalists.

Question 10b: Why?

The reasons given for the status of online journalists not being lower than that of traditional journalists tend to focus on the recognition of the challenges for online journalists in their work and the skills required. As respondent F suggests:

It could be that online journalists do not need to interview people as often as traditional journalists, but they certainly need more IT skills.

Respondent M similarly focuses on the fact that online journalists need ‘... the ability to pick up the important information from lots of different materials.’ This suggests that the core journalistic skills are recognised by the wider profession. On a slightly different tack, respondent P puts forward the following idea:

Even though online journalists may not need a high level of news writing skill, they are seen as possessing the ability to interest readers and get them involved in the contents.

Interestingly, respondent T, whilst not regarding the status of online journalists as being lower than that of traditional journalists still sees a need for ‘more professional ethics’ in online journalism, suggesting that it is an issue common to both groups.

4.1.4 Public role

Question 11: To what extent is online journalism in China controlled by the government?

Response	Respondents
None	0
A little	4
Quite a lot	10
A lot	13
Total	27

All of the respondents agree that there is government control of online journalism in China. Moreover, almost half believe that there is a lot of control and an additional third state that there is quite a lot. The overall view, therefore, quite clearly seems to be that there exists a high degree of government monitoring and censorship of content. The interviewee points out that ‘[government control] is getting tighter and tighter and applies to more aspects of our work’, adding that although the new media enjoy greater freedom, ‘...there is still a bottom line.’

Question 12: To what extent should online journalism have the following functions in society?

<i>Interactive Functions</i>	To create public dialogue	To monitor government	To press for social change	To promote political democracy
Response				
None	0	1	1	3
A little	0	13	1	3
Quite a lot	7	12	17	11
A lot	20	1	8	10
Total	27	27	27	27

As can be seen from the table, all the respondents believe that online journalism has the function of creating public dialogue, with almost three quarters strongly believing that this is an appropriate function of online journalism. This represents a particularly strong consensus on the subject.

The results for the extent to which online journalism should monitor government, whilst also supporting this function, are not as resounding. Almost half (13) of the respondents believe in this function to a small extent and slightly less (12) believe that this function of reporting on the work of government and drawing attention to shortcomings and abuses is quite important.

The respondents' views on the role of online journalism as a means of pressing for social change is quite clear in its affirmation of this role. Almost two thirds believe 'quite a lot' that this is important, whilst a further 30% strongly believe that this is an appropriate role for them to be playing. As with the other results, this indicates strongly that instead of being limited to reflecting the society around them, online journalists see a role for themselves in influencing that society.

Consistent with the pressure for social change, the results for promoting political democracy are also strongly in favour of such a role for online journalism. Over three quarters of the respondents agreed quite a lot or a lot that online journalism should play this role of promoting greater representation in the political process. Only three of the respondents did not regard this as an appropriate role.

4.2 Limitations of data

It is clear that this research relates to a large media sector and it is not logistically possible at this level of research to obtain substantial data from all the Chinese commercial news sites. Consequently, the research has been limited to Sina.com, the largest commercial news website in China. In addition, considering the restraints of time and access to the respondents, a manageable number of questionnaires and interviews were used and has to be admitted that this data cannot be considered to be completely representative of the Internet news sector. Had the sample been greater in number, comparisons based on geographical location, professional background or news department might have been possible, but this was not the case.

However, a sizeable sample was included in the questionnaire data and this included sina.com journalists from different major cities in China to provide a more global assessment of the current views of Chinese online journalists. The questionnaire data is also sufficient to provide an indication of emerging patterns in these views and the researcher went to great lengths to ensure that the sample included those journalists who were best placed to offer informed opinions on the central research questions.

Similarly, although the interview data was limited to a single interviewee, this person is a very senior director in the news company. Access to persons at this level requires a considerable amount of preparation and the researcher was extremely pleased that the interview was finally made possible given that the interviewee would be particularly well-placed to provide data on areas of policy. Clearly, additional data from other sources would have been useful to corroborate the data and make it less subjective, but the data still provides useful insights.

Chapter Five: Analysis of Data

This chapter will explore the implications of the data presented in chapter four and discuss them with reference to the literature in the field. The analysis will follow the four sections introduced in the literature review and analyse the respective data in turn. The discussion will also seek to draw wider inferences from the data and find connections between the original categories.

5.1.1 Market analysis

The data clearly shows that the vast majority of respondents think that online journalism has significantly taken over some functions of the traditional media. The respondents refer to online media duplication of the other media with radio, TV, and print all available online as an example of this process (see also Afele, 2003 on this point). In addition, the journalists' view can be understood in the context of the huge growth of Internet users in China and the fact the majority of these Internet users use the medium as their primary news source (CNNIC, 2007).

Although the Internet penetration is still quite low, leaving many people reliant on the traditional media (Damm and Thomas, 2006), it has been shown that news website visitors are online far more often than the average in China (Nielsen Net Ratings, 2007), suggesting that the medium is particularly suited to news coverage.

The online journalists seem to recognise that the online media are in deep competition with the traditional media. In this situation, the 'media displacement hypothesis' (Krugman 1985, cited in Allan 2005) would suggest that the traditional media use patterns will be restructured and Internet activity such as the searching of online news sites will replace use of other news sources. However, the online journalists strongly believe that the traditional media will not be completely replaced by the online medium in China. This is more consistent with the 'supplement' model (McNair, 1998; Pearson, 1999, cited in Deuze, 2003), which forwards the view that online media are a functional supplement to the traditional media.

The interviewee makes a similar argument, but sees the balance slightly differently. He argues that the online media is not simply the 'supplement' of the traditional media but, as Lievrouw (2004) argues, it is becoming 'mainstream'. Pointing out the exponential growth in users and advertising (see also eMarketer, 2007), he questions whether it is not the case that the traditional media will come to supplement the online news media.

The fact that the majority of the online journalists either disagreed or disagreed strongly that traditional journalism will become redundant in the future, in contrast to Cohen's (2002) predictions, also seems to reflect the belief that the public have their own preferences. Thus, respondents refer to lifestyles (as do Chan and Leung, 2005), generational factors (see also Jakes, 2003) and the attachment of the public to certain media as reasons why they see the impact of online journalism as having clear limits.

A further argument put forward by the respondents is that online journalism cannot compete with the resources of the traditional media and that the medium 'needs time to develop and mature' (respondent M). Research demonstrates that not only is there little in terms of strategic planning by Chinese state news agencies to systematically exploit the new medium, but that there has been minimal investment in their websites (Mu, 2004). In addition, the lack of development of these sites beyond text representations of stories appearing in the print media is testimony to the under-exploitation of the medium, whereas commercial sites such as Sina.com tend to be far superior in this respect.

An additional reason for the view that there are limits to the online media share of the market in the Chinese context comes from the restrictions that are imposed on the role of commercial news site journalists (Lee, 2004). As respondents argue, they are 'banned from conducting interviews' (respondent M), though in practice this applies principally to political news (Interviewee). This professional reality therefore necessarily involves journalists from other media in the conducting of the interviews and allows them a market advantage in terms of breaking news and creates some degree of dependency by commercial online sites on the traditional media.

5.1.2 Product analysis

Traditional journalists have consistently questioned the originality and credibility of online content (Garrison, 2000; Chan et al, 2006). However, given online journalists' reliance on official or authorised news sources (CNNIC, 2000), it is interesting to note that well over half of the respondents not only believe that originality is important in online content, but they also believe that quite a lot or a lot of online journalism news material is 'original'. This raises the important question of how the journalists' work could be described as 'original', given the restrictions under which they operate.

According to the chief editor in Sina.com (the interviewee), there are three sources of Internet news content for the commercial news sites in China: recycling of the print media content; news obtained directly; and the contribution from the users through the blogs and the readers' comments sent directly to the editorial team. Thus, whilst 'shovelware' (Ross and Middleberg, cited in Deuze, 1999:374) exists, there is also original news on the news sites, contrary to the arguments of writers such as Chan et al (2006).

The chief editor in Sina.com maintains that in order to obtain original news, the news sites must 'hit line balls', i.e. hit the ball to the very edge of the ping-pong table to score a point. In other words, they are forced to use their ingenuity to get around the restrictions. The interviewer does emphasize, however, that this is limited to certain kinds of news such as entertainment news, sports news and real estate news without sensitive political content. This action has been described as playing a 'cat-and- mouse game' with the media controllers (Romano & Bromley, 2005) and reflects the 'wobble room' (Zhou, 2006) in the current system as well as the importance placed by the site on having additional content. It could be argued that it is the increasingly commercial environment (Zhao, 2000) and the need to attract an audience that acts as a stimulus for this kind of activity.

Originality in news reporting, the respondents argue, is also not only a question of creating the raw data through interviews and having reporters at key events to cover key events. In this sense, the criticism that online journalism is simple editing of tertiary sources (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000) could be inaccurate.

According to the journalists, it is also a question of constructing argument and commenting on relevant events. Frustration about restrictions on the journalists' work, however, is evident in the comments by respondent F:

We have talented journalists and innovative ideas about how to present the news, but we need the basic right to interview, otherwise we have to always depend on other news sources.

The credibility of online material has often been questioned (Hall, 2001) and the respondents are aware of the potential credibility difficulties associated with the medium. The perception that there is no quality control of content placed on the Internet is an enduring one (Bucy, 2003) and the issue is especially pertinent to the 24/7 nature of online journalism generally (Hall, 2001), since the constant pressure to make material available could, it is argued, undermine the gate-keeping that maintains professional standards (Pan and Chan, 2003; Deuze and Yeshua, 2000). However, as the chief editor states:

We are trying to build more confidence of users in the credibility of our online news. We have rules that if our editors adopt news, they need to check the news from three different sources.

Similarly, regarding the use of content from the site's blogs and the readers' comments, the interviewee points out the following:

The only thing to do is to depend on the judgment of the editors, based on their working experience. However, the news from the users is quite limited and we have lots of experienced senior editors to take responsibility for this field

Thus, the news site does have strict quality control procedures and research suggests that the public's growing familiarity with the online medium is increasing their ability to discern between the more and less credible sites (Fang, 2003). This increased user sophistication may go some way to explaining the senior editor's high regard for procedures guaranteeing news accuracy; online news sites can aim to establish their individual credentials and gain the trust of the public. The commercial sites do not have the advantage of the credibility associated with a 'mother medium' (Anderson and Tracey, 2001), but credibility can be built through a professional approach towards accuracy and relevance.

Overall, there is a clear opinion amongst the online journalists that interactivity is an important quality of the medium which should be exploited. They seem to recognise the potential that it offers to provide a different news experience to the user (Kopper et al, 2000) and the opportunity it presents to create a new and more dynamic relationship between the news provider and user (Ward, 2002). Respondent T refers to the use of interactive qualities of online news in the following:

[Online journalism] makes it easier for us to provide readers with access to primary source materials, to solicit feedback and discussion, and to integrate text (audio and video).

The fact that two thirds of the respondents regard the use of hyperlinks as being important strongly suggests that the Sina.com journalists appreciate that they can facilitate the online investigation by readers and therefore be a starting point rather than the sole information provider (Dahlgren 2002, cited in Deuze, 2003). Whereas the official news media groups tend to have only text-based versions of their print news (Cohen, 2002), the commercial news sites show indications of being more progressive in their adoption of hyperlinks, though it is worth pointing out that many of these are kept within the branded frame of the newspaper (Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000). This may be due, at least in part, to the official restrictions on links to international sites and non-authorized content (Wei and Liu, 2002).

The blogs, regarded by three fifths of those interviewed as either 'quite useful' or 'very useful' suggest a belief in the value of creating dialogue between the media and user (Qi, 2000). This is particularly significant in the light of the positive value given to the role of online journalism in expanding the public sphere (Matheson, 2004), since the blogs provide a forum for the exchange of opinions on a range of issues. Blogs can fundamentally alter the role of journalist from sole information provider as the users can, to an extent, claim ownership over the space and make their own contributions (Anderson, 2007). Readers' comments, also well valued by the respondents, play a similar role of two-way communication between user and news site as well as between the user group (Stafford et al, 2005).

5.1.3 Profession analysis

This section begins by analysing the skills of the online journalists. The majority of have traditional media backgrounds, but a significant number (almost a third) have computer technology backgrounds. The division is revealing in that it strongly suggests that both technical skills and journalistic skills are highly valued in this online media setting, though the latter more so. This finding is consistent with the skills emphasis found amongst online journalists by Pan and Chan (2003:676) and is one that contrasts the view of online news as ‘news-packaging’ not requiring journalistic skills (Hall, 2001). Indeed, as the interviewee states:

Although we need journalists with some computer skills, such as photography and Java, the most important thing is the skill of journalism ... a good sense of news, reporting ability and editing ability.

The respondents also emphasize the need for traditional journalistic skills and on the whole see themselves as having solid journalistic credentials with the result that respondent M is able to summarise the transition from the traditional media to online media as being ‘...the same job with different tools’. This view is consistent with the view put forward by Allan (2006) that it is easier to teach the technical skills to those with a journalistic background than the other way round. Journalistic skills of being able to see a story, compose it in an appealing way and create the right relationship with the reader are therefore as highly regarded and indispensable as in other media settings. In this sense, the online journalists are not a ‘different breed’ from other journalists (Meek, 2000) and there are three times as many responses highlighting the importance of being able to recognise and deal with the news than there are emphasizing the need for technical skills.

However, the technological requirements of online journalism are also evident. Over a quarter of the respondents say that a solid background in computing is needed and two of the respondents refer directly to the demands of learning to use ‘Photoshop’ and ‘Dreamweaver’. As Hall (2001:91) points out, for many journalists, it is often the ability to conceptualise the journalistic pieces in multimedia and interactive terms that is required, rather than a mastery of the online software.

An additional finding to emerge from the data was that the busy online media environment presents a different way of working to the traditional media. Hall (2001:88), for example, refers to the 'exigencies of rolling deadlines' and the interviewee notes the following:

Generally speaking, when people work for the printed media, they have a regular deadline: [for] newspapers once a week, or once a month for the magazine. However, [for] the new media ...there are no deadlines at all...you have to update the news every minute.

In addition to presenting challenges for traditional journalists who are used to working to a single deadline, the busy online environment also introduces the issue of whether journalistic values are compromised by the medium and its different working practices (Pan and Chan, 2003). The results suggest quite strongly that the online journalists do indeed regard standards as having suffered in several areas, with over half of the respondents stating that the relevance of content has declined. Owing to the belief the respondents have in the quality of their own journalism, however, this may well be due to the existence of a plethora of online news sites, many of which are poor quality and do not have a journalistic staff (Chan et al, 2004).

The questionnaire results also reveal a commonly held view that the depth of analysis has been negatively impacted by the format and the tendency of many online news sites to package news for easy consumption by non-critical users (Chan, 2006). Similarly, over two thirds believe that accuracy has become compromised and more respondent (D) refers explicitly to a 'need for more professional ethics in the 24/7 news circle environment.' Thus, although Pan (2000b) and others have argued that market competition can result in a professional culture, the respondents do not view all online news sites as having developed this culture.

Interestingly, given the consensus that professional standards have suffered through online journalism (Kopper, 2000), there is almost unanimous agreement that the status of online journalists is not lower than that of those in the traditional media. At first glance, this may seem contradictory, but it may be the case that a

distinction is being made between persons operating some news sites and a 'true' online journalist.

The Sina.com journalists demonstrate a strong sense of identity and confidence in their own professional backgrounds, possibly owing to the fact that Sina.com has a strong reputation as a news site (Jeffrey, 2000) and therefore commands respect within the profession. In addition, society's changing view of the credibility of the Internet content (Bucy, 2003) and the profession's recognition of the validity of online journalism (Deuze, 1999) strongly suggest that, despite the varying quality of online news, established news sites such as Sina.com are able to create a strong professional profile.

5.1.4 Public role analysis

For many, freedom of expression under a free press system is regarded as a fundamental aim of journalism and this freedom allows journalists to provide citizens with the information that they need to be free and self-governing (Tai, 2006). However, there is universal agreement amongst the respondents that for Chinese online journalists there exists a high degree of control by the authorities. Respondent L, for example, explains that commercial online news sites such as Sina.com have been particularly affected by the Party's Internet policy as it means that they are not able to 'legitimately conduct [their] interviews' and their use of other sources has become heavily regulated.

At prima facie, this may seem unsurprising given that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has traditionally maintained strong control of the media (Weber, 2002). However, there had been some indications of policy liberalisation for the media in general (see Bi, 2001) and the Internet in particular (Jeffrey, 2000 and Xu, 2003). In addition, the authorities have claimed to be more lenient towards the new media (Lu, 2004), but the respondents are unanimous in their view that their work is subject to excessive control.

Lieberthal (2004) comments that there was indeed a relaxation of controls for online news sites, but that the restrictions introduced for commercial online news sites were intended to curb what was viewed as an unwelcome level of

investigation and comment by online journalists. Thus, it can be seen that media liberalisation gave scope for reform minded professional journalists (Zhao, 2000). Since that time, strict regulations have been established over the content of the Internet media (Lee, 2004), a factor that the senior editor affirms in his statement that ‘...although the new media enjoy more freedom than the traditional media in China, there is still a bottom line.’

Certainly, the respondents were extremely aware of the limitations placed on their work and the need to conform to the content approved by the official state bodies. In this respect, the role of the journalists is defined, to an extent by the state, and even if the commercial operators are not directly ‘state propagandists’ (Zhang, 2000), they are constrained from playing a more dynamic public role that would conform to more western definitions of the function of journalists (Zeliger, 2004). The overseas media exhibiting these western values can be seen to provide ‘professional inspiration and exemplars’ for Chinese journalists facing such restrictions on their work (Pan and Lu, 2003) and thus contribute to the forging of a professional identity.

Significantly, given the perceived control, the respondents believe very strongly that online journalism has the function of creating public dialogue. The desire for freedom of expression, it can be argued, is entirely consistent with online journalists contributing to the expanding social sphere on the Internet. Thus, whilst state news agencies in all media forms have held propagandist roles (Heinonen, 1999) that are inconsistent with a participatory social model, the commercial sector’s ‘client-based’ philosophy (Donald et al, 2002) supports an emphasis on the public sphere. These values are also seen in the high regard the respondents showed for blogs and readers’ comments.

From the data, the respondents overall also believe that online journalism should monitor government, but this sentiment is not as strongly felt as the need to create a public sphere. This supports to an extent the ‘fourth estate’ role that is often advocated as a function of journalism (Pan and Lu, 2003), but suggests that the journalists, whether owing to political pragmatism or a question of priority do not see monitoring government as being as central as creating public dialogue. This

may stem from the current reality that the government does allow and often encourages the exposure of inefficiency and corruption at lower levels, but it does so without allowing serious criticism of higher-level officials (Marcus, 2002).

Support for online journalism's role in pressing for social change could be seen quite strongly in the research, with most respondents in favour of this journalistic function. This would seem to support the view of McQuail (2000) that it is the responsibility of the media to express the views of the public for government to influence government. Certainly, this view is consistent with interpretations that the media role is also to represent public opinion and act as a social barometer (Allan, 2005), and may also support a more dynamic interpretation of journalism as a 'public mobiliser' (Weaver and Wilhoit, cited in Pan and Chan, 2003:655).

Freedom of expression can, as Harwitt and Clark (2001) argue, take the form of pressure for social change and greater political democracy and, in the case of the respondents, over three quarters believe either quite strongly or very strongly that promoting political democracy is an appropriate role for them to play. There does seem to be a slight contradiction between this position and the weaker support for the monitoring of government, but the results still represent a strong affirmation of the democratic values implicit in the higher ideals of journalism (Zelizer, 2004).

Overall, the results in this section can be seen as indicating a clear contrast between the views held by the online journalists and those held by the authorities that the media should be at the service of the Party. The data strongly suggests that the journalists have cultivated a 'professional culture' (Pan, 2000b), most likely for both commercial reasons (Donald et al, 2000) and as a resistance to state control (Zhang, 2000). We might infer that the same ideals that began to emerge during the economic reform and openness era (Zhao, 2000) and which were increasingly identifiable with the WTO period (Pan and Lu, 2003) are finding greater support and expression within the profession now that there is a more market-based media system.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Overview

The research overall suggests very strongly that, despite the relative newness of web-based journalism, the online journalists in Sina.com have a strong and coherent sense of identity. Moreover, the opinions put forward show quite a high degree of consensus on the issues under discussion and reveal a strong belief by the journalists in their professionalism. Most importantly for this study, many of the values expressed were consistent with established journalistic values.

The online journalists view a strong role for their work in the news market and most believe quite strongly that they can compete with the traditional news media. The rapid growth of the Internet as a general communication medium in China has been accompanied by a shrinking of traditional news audiences (Nielsen Net Ratings, 2007), which would appear to support the journalists' confidence in the strength of their news medium. However, this is seen as being complementary to the traditional news media rather than replacing it. The journalists are aware not only of the hardware limitations in China (CNNIC, 2007), but acknowledge generational (Jakes, 2003), lifestyle and individual factors (Chang and Leung, 2005) as creating an affinity to the traditional media. Furthermore, as one respondent put it: 'The traditional media have huge resources to draw on and dominate news collection and delivery.'

Literature on online journalism raises concerns about the credibility of online journalism. As Stain (1999, cited in Deuze, 2003) argues, there is an attitude that, with no gatekeepers, 'anything goes' on the Internet. However, in the case of Sina.com, the editor has to check the news from three different sources before putting it online (Interviewee). Moreover, the online journalists indicate a strong belief in their own professionalism and pride in the reputation of Sina.com and the quality of its contents. Research suggests that as the Internet is becoming mainstream (Lievrouw, 2004), the public's familiarity with the medium allows them to differentiate better between those sites which are more or less credible (Chan et al, 2006) and the online journalists also seem to be working on this assumption.

Another charge levelled at online journalism is that it lacks originality and consists simply of a 're-editing of material from existing news sources' (Deuze, 1999:374). This research does indeed identify issues surrounding originality and these principally relate to restrictions placed on the journalists by the authorities. Commercial online journalists are forbidden from directly obtaining news, which instead must be passed on from the officially approved outlets (Freshfields, Bruckhaus & Deringer, 2004), and an overwhelming majority of the journalists indicated that strong political control still impacted greatly on their work.

Despite these restraints, however, the journalists still feel strongly that their work is original. Many respondents refer to their professional skills in terms of being able to develop stories from the print media with insightful comment and analysis. As the interviewee states, it is also possible to obtain news directly provided that it does not contain overtly political content. Thus, a 'cat and mouse game' with the authorities results in a substantial degree of original, though non-controversial, content. This is consistent with Zhou's description of the 'wobble room' in the rather ad hoc media policies in place (2006:186). Furthermore, contributions from the users through the blogs and the readers' comments sent directly to the editorial team are an important feature of Sina.com and go some way to explaining the extremely strong support amongst the journalists for the interactive potential of the medium to be exploited. Respondents stated that interactivity presents an opportunity to create a new and more dynamic relationship between news providers and users (see also Dimmick et al, 2000; Anderson et al, 2007).

The online journalists also indicated that they see their status as being equal to that of traditional journalists. The significance of this lies in the fact that online journalists for some time were not regarded as belonging to the established journalistic profession (Kopper et al, 2000). In the case of Sina.com, the differentiation appears to be waning, in part owing to the fact that almost two thirds of the journalists have backgrounds in the traditional media. The sense of professionalism would also seem to also reflect the journalists views that, in contrast to the concept of 'news packing' (Hall, 2001), their online news roles are still complex and involve traditional skills such as professional reporting and writing ability.

An additional clear finding of the research is that the online environment is viewed as challenging by the journalists. With reference to the 24/7 nature of online news (Hall, 2001), the interviewee states that ‘...some journalists find it a difficult transition to the constant pressure to produce news.’ Moreover, the journalists need technical proficiency and to be able to produce work in a multi-media format, all of which seem to produce a strong sense amongst online journalists of their professional worth.

Another journalistic value, that of a ‘public service role’ (Harcup, 2004) is also clearly evident in the attitudes of the journalists, who express a strong belief in the functions of their work as increasing the public sphere and pressing for social change. This is particularly significant in the light of the official restrictions under which they operate and which they must attempt to circumvent for their professional and commercial purposes. When seen in conjunction with the emphasis on the news site blogs and reader comments, the value placed on a forum for users’ ideas becomes evident.

Job autonomy is increasing generally amongst Chinese journalists (Chan, 2006) and the increasing liberalization of the media reforms may also contribute to a desire for greater freedom of expression. Interestingly, although there was agreement that the media should be involved in monitoring government as the ‘fourth estate’, this was not valued as strongly as the other public service roles. It suggests that the online media, despite wanting greater expression and espousing democratic views, are not yet ready to directly oppose the government.

In conclusion, Chinese online journalism is no longer a fledgling industry and this maturation appears to be accompanied by an increased sense of identity and confidence in the profession. Moreover, the research indicates that the journalists are contemplating the implications of the new technology not only for their work and skills but also for their professional identity and their role in society. The values revealed by the research are, on the whole, consistent with those put forward as ‘traditional journalistic values’ (Zelitzer, 2004), suggesting that they are being transferred to the new medium as it becomes more established and as the market liberalization introduces competition and a client-centred culture.

6.2 The future

Predictions about the future of online journalism seem to change as rapidly as the phenomenon itself. As Kopper et al (2000:499) state: 'Ask ten researchers [about the future] and you will get eleven answers.' The same is undoubtedly true of the complex situation in China; however, there are emerging trends identifiable in this research that provide an indication of possible future developments. To begin with, online journalism is becoming increasingly 'mainstream' (Lievrouw, 2004), and with this development we can expect greater investment in online news resources at the same time as increased investment in hardware. The Morgan Stanley China Internet Report (2005), for example, predicts that China will become the world leader in all five core areas of the Internet market, which can only serve to further establish the online medium.

As online news becomes more established, the same need for credibility of news sites and their 'role as a filter' (Anderson et al, 2007:126) can be expected to become more present. Indeed, Sina.com appears to already have taken steps to ensure the accuracy of their content and the commercial pressures to gain public confidence suggest that the process will continue. This same relationship with the public also means we are likely to see journalists looking for further ways to interact with the public, possibly through further exploitation of the medium's interactive functions.

Whereas media reforms have brought a degree of liberalization, as Lee (2004) argues, there is no end goal in the current media policy and it is difficult to predict the extent to which restrictions on the online journalists will change. However, as a strong degree of consensus appears to have already developed amongst the online journalistic profession, we might expect to see a further solidifying of those values over time and, should commercialization be given greater reign as predicted (Zhang, 2000), there may be an accompanying increase in the corresponding individualistic values present in a client-centred culture. The ideals of 'public service' can already be seen in the research and, given the opportunity, the online media may be emboldened by future developments now that it appears to be both mainstream and increasingly accepted as 'authentic journalism'.

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Online Journalism Questionnaire

This questionnaire forms part of a Master's research project on online journalism and it's implications.

All responses will be treated in the strictest confidentiality and any reference in the research to responses will be anonymous.

Please complete the questions as fully as possible.

Part one: Background Information

Location: _____

Age: _____

Education Background: _____

Part Two: Questions

1. To what extent do you think online journalism has taken over the functions of the traditional media in China?

None A little Quite a lot A lot

2a) To what extent do you agree that online journalism will make the traditional media completely redundant in the future?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree Disagree Strongly disagree
Nor disagree

2b) Why?

3. To what extent do you think the following interactive functions should be used in online journalism?

a) Hyperlinks to external content Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

b) Reader blogs Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

c) Databases of archive material Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

d) Reader comments to editors Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

4a. Compared with the traditional media, what do you think are the limitations of online journalism?

4b. What can be done to overcome these limitations?

5. To what extent do you think online journalism creates *original* news material?

None A little Quite a lot A lot

6. How important do you think the *original* news material to online journalism?

Not Important A little Quite important Very important

7. To what extent do you think the following have been negatively affected as a result of online journalism?

a) Choice of relevant content None A little Quite a lot A lot

b) Depth of analysis None A little Quite a lot A lot

c) Verification of facts None A little Quite a lot A lot

d) Originality of content None A little Quite a lot A lot

e) Accuracy None A little Quite a lot A lot

8a. What's your career background?

Computer subjects

Used to work for traditional media

None of these

Others

8b. How easy a transition do you think it is from the traditional media to online journalism?

Very easy Quite easy Neither easy Quite difficult Very difficult
Nor difficult

8c. Why?

9. What skills and attitudes do you think are necessary for an online journalist?

10a. To what extent do you agree that the status of online journalists is lower than that of those in the traditional media

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree Disagree Strongly disagree
Nor disagree

10b. Why?

11. To what extent is government control of online journalism?

None A little Quite a lot A lot

12. To what extent should online journalism have the following functions in society?

- | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a) To create public dialogue | None <input type="checkbox"/> | A little <input type="checkbox"/> | Quite a lot <input type="checkbox"/> | A lot <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) To monitor government | None <input type="checkbox"/> | A little <input type="checkbox"/> | Quite a lot <input type="checkbox"/> | A lot <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) To press for social change | None <input type="checkbox"/> | A little <input type="checkbox"/> | Quite a lot <input type="checkbox"/> | A lot <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d) To promote political democracy | None <input type="checkbox"/> | A little <input type="checkbox"/> | Quite a lot <input type="checkbox"/> | A lot <input type="checkbox"/> |

Interview Transcription

Interviewee: Chief Editor of Sina.com

Interviewer: To what extent do you agree that new media will make the traditional media completely redundant in the sense of market?

Well, it is very clear that the Internet has had a dramatic development in China. More importantly, the number of users is growing quickly as well because of the unique characteristics of the Internet. It can offer almost every type of content which traditional media can offer, for example, we can read news, watch TV, listen to music, shop online and so on.

The increasing numbers of users' offers a huge market for new media and the advertisers value this, which makes our profits keep increasing every year. For instance, at the end of June 2007, the advertising income of sina.com in China was 40,300,000 dollars, which is 40 per cent higher than last year. Even now, TV advertising is still the main advertising market, but, in the future, we are confident that the new media's market will be the most important one. On the other hand, there will still be space for the traditional media market because the distribution of the Internet is still based in big cities and the rural areas still have a long way to go before the populations there are all online and regularly using the Internet.

Interviewer: According to the law in 2000 'Internet content providers (ICPs) can only carry news stories from the officially sanctioned news media,' so, what are the main information sources for online journalism in China?

We have three main ways to get the news information: firstly, recycling the news from the traditional media, especially from the newspapers, which is the most important information source for us. Secondly, we get news directly from our journalists. This is limited to certain fields: sports news, entertainment news, business news and so on. As regards political news, it is very important that we just collect it from the officially sanctioned news media. Thirdly, we collect information from the users' blogs and the chat

rooms, BBS, or other interactive sources. These three ways guarantee that we can cover the most important issues and offer the freshest news.

Interviewer: If online journalism has to adapt the news from the traditional media, the official sanctioned news media, and the users, to what extent is the content of online news sites original and credible?

As a result of the law which restricts the sources that can be used by commercial online news sites, I would say that we have a unique way of finding the space to survive: we are playing ‘hitting line balls’ with the media controllers, which means, playing the ball to the very edge of the ping-pong table to score. In other words, there is a grey area for us to survive. First, as I have mentioned before, in non-political ways, we can have our own professional journalists working in certain fields to get first-hand information. For instance, our sports journalists can offer the freshest news for the users and users can chat about the sports with each other online. In this case, our contents are original, and normally, traditional media journalists get the information from online media. The only thing we need to remember is that we cannot offer original political news and we cannot include the journalist’s name. Instead, we have to put a general reference such as ‘sina.com sports channel’

Moreover, not just because the Internet laws in China stipulate that content and service providers are responsible for the content that their Web sites carry, but more important for us, we are trying to build more confidence of users in the credibility of our online news, so we have rules that if our editors adopt news, they need to check the news from three different sources.

Regarding the information from users, the only thing to do is to depend on the judgement of the editors, based on their working experience. However, the news from the users is quite limited and we have lots of experienced senior editors to take responsibility for this field.

Interviewer: As a chief editor, you have worked for both the traditional media and the online media. What differences are there? What kind of background do you look for in the staff you hire: traditional journalists or new staff with computer skills?

Well, I have worked for the printed media for 6 years and for the new media for 7 years. The most different thing for me was the way of working.

Generally speaking, when people work for the printed media, they have a regular deadline. For example, people just need go to the newspaper once a week, or once a month if they work for the magazine. Since I joined the new media, it seems as if everyday is the deadline or there is no deadline at all and you have to update the news every day or even every minute. So, if you work for the traditional media, you can control your time, because you know the deadline and you have a kind of freedom, while if you work for the new media, you almost always have to face the computer. Some of the traditional journalists weren't able to adapt to this faster working style. They complained that there is too much for them to do and then went back to the traditional media.

However, I have to say that I like to work with people who have the traditional media experience. Although we need journalists with some computer skills, such as photography and Java, the most important thing is the skill of journalism ... a good sense of news, reporting ability and editing ability. In my experience, you can train people to use computer skills in a short time, while it is difficult to train people to be journalists in a short time.

Interviewer: To what extent is there government control of content of online journalism?

The government control of new media content is getting tighter and tighter with the law of Internet information in China including more details and applying to more aspects of our work. Although the new media enjoy more freedom than the traditional media in China, there is still a bottom line that applies to all the media. That is all I can say in this field.