

THE CHINESE APPROACH TO WEB  
JOURNALISM:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

by

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the distinctive forms of journalism that have emerged in mainstream news websites in mainland China. Two case studies, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, are employed to identify features in Chinese and Western news online. Specifically, a comparison is made between the in-depth news sections of popular mainstream news websites in China and those in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. The study finds that the Chinese version of mainstream web news genre differs significantly from the Western version. This thesis argues that journalists' practice is strongly context dependent. Distinctive economic, organizational, social and cultural factors contribute to shaping Chinese web journalism in a way that contradicts the notion of a homogeneous worldwide journalism or of a single set of norms for journalism. The study challenges the dominance of the political explanatory framework that considers political factors as the most important approach to study Chinese web-based media. In the face of a sparse literature and sporadic studies concerning the development of the internet as a novel platform in China for news production and transmission, this thesis aims to bring more academic interest to an overlooked research area and to contribute to a broader understanding of the actual diversity of global communication research.

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# Table of contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature Review.....	7
2.1 Literature review on internet-based media in China.....	9
2.1.1 Sparse literature on internet-based media in China.....	9
2.1.2 Heavy emphasis on political-economic implications.....	10
2.1.3 Neglect of social, cultural and historical factors.....	17
2.1.4 Sporadic studies on web journalism in China.....	19
2.2 Theoretical framework of new media studies.....	21
2.3 Conceptual framework of web journalism.....	28
2.3.1 Rosy promises and ideal models.....	30
2.3.2 Empirical research—testing previous ideal models.....	47
2.3.3 Useful alternative approach to the study of web journalism.....	54
3. Background Introduction.....	59
3.1 Chinese media system.....	59
3.2 Development of the internet in China.....	61
3.3 Online news media in China.....	65
3.4 Case study introduction.....	75
4. Theory and Method.....	80
4.1 Genre analysis.....	81
4.1.1 General theoretical framework.....	81
4.1.2 Digital genre analysis.....	84
4.2 Comparative analysis.....	90
4.3 Case studies of news events.....	93
4.4 Research design and specific methods.....	100
5. Case study of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.....	106
5.1 Introduction.....	106
5.2 Multimediality.....	108
5.2.1 Graphic Olympics.....	109
5.2.2 Webcasting the Olympics.....	130
5.2.3 Olympic multimedia news packages.....	152
5.3 Interactivity.....	162
5.3.1 Inactive interactivity.....	164
5.3.2 Active interactivity.....	174
5.3.3 Highly active interactivity.....	210
5.3.4 Summary and implications.....	214
5.4 Hypertextuality.....	216
5.4.1 Analysis of the front page of in-depth sections.....	217
5.4.2 Analysis within textual news items.....	222
5.5 Textual news analysis.....	242
5.6 Chapter summary.....	257



6. Case study of H1N1 influenza Pandemic .....	267
6.1 Introduction .....	267
6.2 Multimediality .....	268
6.2.1 The use of pictures and graphics .....	269
6.2.2 The use of audio and video .....	277
6.2.3 Multimedia news packages .....	282
6.3 Interactivity .....	284
6.3.1 Inactive interactivity .....	285
6.3.2 Active interactivity and highly active interactivity .....	290
6.3.3 Summary and implications .....	305
6.4 Hypertextuality .....	306
6.4.1 Analysis of the front page of in-depth sections .....	306
6.4.2 Analysis within textual news items .....	309
6.5 Textual news analysis .....	313
6.6 Chapter summary .....	331
7. Implications and conclusion .....	338
References .....	356

# 1. Introduction

As the fastest growing medium ever recorded, the internet, particularly the World Wide Web, has offered spectacularly different means for collecting, producing, organizing and disseminating information. Expectations are high concerning the internet's potential to transform the journalistic world. Media scholars since the mid-1990s have embraced the promise of an "age of the net" (Heinonen, 1999), "a whole new journalism" (Quittner, 1995), an "annotative journalism" (Paul, 1995), as well as an innovative "future of journalism" (Pavlik, 1997). Numerous theoretical frameworks and empirical studies have then followed to closely explore journalistic practice online. Within the ever-increasing literature and research on web journalism worldwide, it deserves to be noted that the US- and UK-based academic studies actually far outweigh studies of anywhere else, such as Asian, African, and Pacific nations. Indeed, in most forms of media, the models and theories that prevail in Western Europe and North America tend to be dominant around the globe (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The key strain of global communication, according to Hall, remains "centered in the West and it always speaks English" (1991: 28). The concentration of media scholarship on a few nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, indeed ignores the real diversity of world media systems. As there is growing discussion on the practice and impacts of the internet as a flourishing global media, I advocate that "no global media outlet can be considered truly 'global', if it fails to reach a quarter of the world's population" and the global communication system would remain "a far-fetched myth without China's involvement and full commitment" (Shi, 2005: 33). Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to contribute to the diversity of the global communication study by analyzing Chinese<sup>1</sup> mainstream web journalism in a global context.

## **Purpose of the study**

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, "China" or "Chinese" refers to mainland China or the mainland Chinese, unless specified otherwise.

This research was mainly triggered by a disappointed experience when using the well-known academic database *Web of Science*<sup>2</sup> to search for essays on Chinese news media. By the end of 2007, there were 4017 results on the database for the term “news media” alone, compared with only 55 results or 46 results when “China” or “Chinese” were added in the search box. The sharp contrast also occurred when searching “internet + media” and “internet + media + China”—yielding 3743 results and 37 results respectively. A piece of empirical research conducted by Kluver and Yang (2007) also confirms the sparse academic interest in Chinese internet-based media (this will be discussed more in the literature review). In contrast to the limited academic interest in web-based media in China, recent statistical reports have shown an undisputed huge potential for the online media market in China. There has been an exponential increase in the number of Chinese internet users in recent years. By the end of June, 2008, the overall number of netizens<sup>3</sup> in China was 253 million, surpassing the netizen population of the US (218 million by the end of 2007), taking China to first place in the world in numbers (CNNIC, July 2008). By 31 December 2009, the overall number of netizens in China had increased to 384 million, with 90.1 percent of them broadband internet users (CNNIC, January 2010). The sparse academic interest and the considerable potential of the Chinese internet market have made China a promising site in the field of web journalism studies.

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to present a thorough understanding of mainstream web journalism in China. The object of this research is mainstream web news, which consists of mainstream news websites providing a selection of editorial news content, be it transferred from traditional media or originally generated for the web. By “mainstream”, I emphasize the news material created by journalistic professionals who work for mainstream-oriented news organizations that have a sizeable audience base. In particular, this research aims to identify essential elements

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<sup>2</sup> *Web of Science* is a prominent online academic database provided by Thomson Scientific. Its database covers over 10,000 leading journals in science, technology, social sciences, arts and humanities as well as international coverage for over 120,000 conferences. The search’s date range was “1900-1914 to 2007”.

<sup>3</sup> According to the semiofficial China Internet Network Information Centre’s (CNNIC) report, the term netizen refers to any Chinese citizen aged 6 and above who have used the internet in the past half a year.

that constitute the mainstream web news genre and thus to propose some distinctive characteristics of Chinese mainstream web journalism by comparing those elements with those of web news in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. In short, the research is mainly focusing on three aspects, namely, feature characterization, feature comparison and context interpretation.

### **Theoretical foundation**

This study has incorporated a wide range of prevailing theoretical frameworks to examine the features of mainstream web journalism in a global context. The essential theoretical foundation lies in the literature on digital media and journalism online. Lievrouw and Livingstone's (2002) three-element framework of new media research serves as an overarching structure for this study. Three aspects, namely, "the artefacts or devices that enable and extend our ability to communicate", "the communication activities and practices we engage in to develop and use these devices", and "the social arrangements and organizations that form around these devices and practices", are crucial to any research concerning the new media, according to Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002: 7). In terms of this study, the utilization of artefacts or devices of the web-based media within various contexts are the main objects of the research. A traits-based approach is employed to analyze the most discussed features of the internet media—the multimediality, interactivity and hypertextuality of news online. Moreover, Lievrouw and Livingstone's theory has sensitized researchers to the interdependence between media technologies and social elements, which is the focus of this thesis. The contextual factors that shape the development of journalism online are explored in this study with the help of genre analysis. Genre theory, especially genre analysis in the field of computer mediated communication, is applied in this research to identify contextual meanings of genres and position them within their social and cultural circumstances. How the mainstream web news genre defines, organizes and finally communicates with various social realities is the essential concern.

On the basis of the overall theoretical structure above, a good many specific theoretical frameworks are employed in this research to help with the analysis in specific dimensions. As to the multimedia news content, a key concept is the “multimedia news package” that goes beyond mere technical or format combinations (Deuze, 2003; Zerba, 2004). It is claimed to be a thoughtful media strategy to fulfil some of the medium’s potential in producing accurate, up-to-the-minute, contextual and complete news stories (Kawamoto, 2003). In terms of interactivity, which is perhaps the most discussed feature of the online environment, a helpful and generally agreed method is to conceptualize interactivity through the distinction between medium interactivity and human interactivity. The approach of inactive and active interactivity proposed by Hong et al. (2008) is at the core of this dimensional analysis. In addition to this general framework, I advocate conceptualizing interactivity as a multidimensional construct with a series of interactive features facilitating online news. Heeter’s (1989) six-dimensional construct of interactivity is employed in this phase of analysis to explore specific components or categories of interactive features. The six dimensions of interactivity, 1) complexity of choice available, 2) efforts user must exert, 3) responsiveness to the user, 4) ease of adding information, 5) monitoring information use, and 6) facilitation of interpersonal communication, are widely valued in research for their well-defined explication and practical nature. In terms of hypertextuality, three aspects, namely, context-provision, non-linear approach and different uses of internal and external hyperlinks are crucial with regard to the role of hypertextuality in web journalism. It might be interesting to examine the availability of “self-conscious” hypertextuality and “seamless” intertextuality (Mitra and Cohen, 1999), the blur of different types of news and different genres of news (Bardoel, 2002), and the use of external links to open up new contents (Deuze, 2001). Besides the three novel traits of internet-based media, one more aspect that deserves attention here is the research on textual news online. Despite the increasing popularity of multimedia and interactive news on the web, it is an undisputed fact that news in written texts is and will still be the essential component of web journalism. Hence, it is worthwhile including textual news analysis in this study. Various dynamics in the

news flow, such as the number of news stories, story length, news topics, sources, updates, balance, variety, contexts, and comprehensiveness are the essential elements under study. Rivenburgh's (2004) summary of variations found in previous empirical research on Olympic coverage is quoted as the theoretical foundation for the Beijing Olympic news coverage analysis in the first case study and the five-dimensional framework of risk-related news coverage proposed by Dudo et al. (2007) is employed in the second case study of swine flu news analysis.

### **Method of the study**

It is widely noted that the field of digital media is characterized by constant changes and rapid innovations. Considering the ever-changing nature of the research objects, this study mainly adopts a qualitative approach, rather than a quantitative method that relies considerably on inert statistical data. Three different but closely related methods, namely, genre analysis, comparative analysis and case studies of news events, are employed in this study to explore the distinctive features of mainstream web journalism in China. As mentioned above, genre analysis is a useful theoretical lens for presenting an integrated view of web news features and web news developments within their circumstances. Through comparative analysis between Chinese and Anglo-American web news genres, this thesis attempts to explore the distinctiveness of Chinese web journalism. The comparative design among "most different systems" is the main methodological principle in this research project. My choice of Anglo-American countries, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, is because they are alike in terms of social and media systems, whereas the case of China is expected to be significantly different from them. The case studies of news events provide valuable opportunities for the researcher to make a close examination of the journalistic practice and production. Owing to their significantly different natures, the two news events under study, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, are capable of assisting the exploratory multiple-case study to deliver a more broadly illuminative conclusion.

### **Significance of the study**

As introduced above, there is a sparse literature and sporadic studies concerning the development of the internet as a novel platform in China for news production and transmission. Thus, this thesis is an attempt to bring more academic interest to an overlooked research area and to contribute to a broader understanding of the actual diversity of global communication research. Moreover, this study is distinctive in attempting to study features of Chinese mainstream web journalism via comparative case studies across four countries. Abandoning the widely employed content analysis, this research applies digital genre analysis to examine the news production and dissemination online within different contexts. The focus of this thesis is on analysis of web journalism at the micro levels, including not only widely discussed aspects, such as multimedia, interactive and hypertextual news content, but also the frequently neglected textual news online. The study challenges the dominance of the political explanatory framework that considers political factors as the most important approach to studying Chinese media. In this thesis, all possible influencing factors, ranging from the political and economic to the social, cultural and historical factors, are taken into consideration when explaining the distinctiveness of Chinese web journalism and analyzing the further implications. Given the considerable potential of the Chinese web-based media market and the imperative importance of understanding other cultures and societies in the digital era, this research would to some extent, offer benefits in understanding the world's media system and illuminate emerging trends in the field of web journalism.

## 2. Literature Review

The popularization of the internet and expansion of the web have offered the richest and most complex communication environment that has ever existed. Internet networks possess the ability to remediate all existing media forms into one platform (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). As a consequence, questions of the new possibilities and the impact of cyberspace on news production and dissemination have developed in abundant theoretical discussions and empirical research. Early studies on web journalism have constructed a good many ideal models and have optimistically envisioned a rosy future of “a whole new journalism” (Quittner, 1995). These ideal proposals mainly focus on the use of “artefacts or devices” within news websites that “enable and extend our ability to communicate” (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 7), such as artefacts facilitating multimediality, interactivity, and hypertextuality. In particular, Fagerjord’s (2003) “rhetorical convergence”, Zerba’s (2004) “multimedia news packages”, Hong et al.’s (2008) model of inactive and active interactivity, Heeter’s (1989) six-dimensional construct of interactivity, Pavlik’s (2001) “contextualized journalism”, and Mitra and Cohen’s (1999) “self conscious hypertextuality” and “seamless intertextuality” are discussed in this chapter. Holding out the possibility of a more attractive, informative and comprehensive journalism, these utopian proposals are helpful in delineating the potential innovative trajectory of online journalism and thus are of great value to this study. Nevertheless, due to their underlying “technological determinism”, the first wave of ideal proposals has been criticized for neglecting social, cultural and economic contextual factors that influence how and to what extent journalists use new technologies (Boczkowski, 2004a). Empirical research later on has offered evidence that the development of those ideals in news websites tends to be limited. Various contributing factors, such as economic, journalistic and audience-related issues, have been discussed in the research literature to explain the slow adoption of the internet’s attributes at mainstream news websites. On the basis of both previous literature and empirical



research on web journalism, this thesis mainly focuses on the “communication activities and practices” that online journalists “engage in to develop and use” those communication devices (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 7). Moreover, Lievrouw and Livingstone propose that “social arrangements and organizations that form around these devices and practices” require investigation in any research concerning the new media (2002: 7). In this study, particular attention has been devoted to online journalistic values as well as economic, social and cultural implications. Presented at the end of the literature review are summaries of some limitations of previous empirical studies (e.g. a lack of historical perspective and comparative approach) and a call for useful alternative approaches to study web journalism globally.

Much of the analysis in this thesis on Chinese web journalism is based on the Western theoretical framework and I should explain the motivations for doing so. The most direct reason is that, to date, there has been only sporadic literature on the web-based media in China, as is made evident in the following paragraphs. The lack of specific theoretical models on Chinese web journalism makes it necessary for this study to begin from the prevailing Western theoretical frameworks. Some might query the applicability of Western models to the Chinese case. However, I argue against the criticism of “inapplicability” on three levels. Firstly, the nature of this thesis determines that it would be not a big problem applying Western models to examine the Chinese case. This research mainly focuses on the use and presentation of the internet’s attributes at mainstream news websites. Most Western theoretical frameworks in this regard can be fitted into such a technology-media research design. Of course, it can be expected that minor adaptations and combinations would be needed for the specific analysis. Secondly, it is exactly the question of to what extent the prevailing Western model of web journalism studies can be well applied into Chinese context that calls for more academic attention. Following the literature on new media and internet journalism, this thesis advocates refocusing the analytical lens for studying web journalism to closely examine Chinese journalism online. Particular attention would be devoted to the inconsistency between Western and Chinese

expectations and experience. Thirdly, many (e.g. Boczkowski, 2004b; Oblak, 2005; Hermida and Thurman, 2008) reveal that research conducted within the Western context also encountered problems when employing the prevailing theories proposed by the literature. Thus, implications and underlying rationales behind the inapplicability have attracted much academic interest and resulted in a number of empirical studies (e.g. Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). It is my interest to explore the contributing factors to the inconsistency that exists both between theory and practice as well as between Chinese and the Western journalistic practice. In short, the literature review here is to assist in selecting helpful theoretical frameworks for web journalism studies globally and seeking for reasonable rationales that explain factors shaping the development of web journalism.

## **2.1 Literature review on internet-based media in China**

This section concentrates on the literature about internet-based media in the context of China. The review here finds limited scholarly work focusing on internet-based media in China. The political-economic discourse dominates the related literature, while the social, cultural and historical contexts of China are largely neglected within the limited scholarship. To date, there have been sporadic studies concerning the development of the internet as a novel platform in China for news reporting and transmission. The call for alternative approaches focusing on web-based media in China is imperative.

### **2.1.1 Sparse literature on internet-based media in China**

Generally speaking, China is a rarely studied case within media scholarship. It is noted that analyses of changes in mass media systems have been inclined to draw upon Western media frameworks. The media models and theories that prevail in Western Europe and North America tend to be dominant around the globe (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Within the limited scholarly work on Chinese media, much attention has been paid to print and broadcasting news media and the journalists they employ

(e.g. Polunbaum, 1990, Chen and Lee, 1998; Pan, 2000; Pan and Lu, 2003). To date, little attention has been devoted to online news products in China or Chinese online journalists, despite the fact that the internet is a fast growing news market (He and Zhu, 2002; CNNIC, 2010). Kluver and Yang's (2005) meta-review across various disciplines on the issue of the internet in China has revealed the gap in academic analysis. Drawn from an extensive bibliography of academically oriented research on the internet in China published since 1990, their study shows the academic interest on this issue peaked in 2000, with 34 separate papers. After 2000, publication began to decrease dramatically. The concentration of media scholarship on a few nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, actually ignores the real diversity of world media systems. As Curran and Park point out, American and British media academics "are beginning to feel embarrassed about viewing the rest of the world as a forgotten understudy" (2000: 3). Hughes and Silverstone note that some changes are required, "given the new role that China must play in international affairs" after entering the World Trade Organization (WTO), and "given the increasingly vital importance of understanding other cultures and societies in a post-September 11 World" (Hughes and Silverstone, 2002: 139).

### 2.1.2 Heavy emphasis on political-economic implications

Within the limited academic work on internet-based media in China, the political-economic perspective has overwhelmingly dominated analysis. The development of information communication technologies (ICTs) has made it possible for more information and resources exchange and has created new platforms for constructing arguments. As such, it is argued that burgeoning communication and coordination via internet networks have accelerated globalization so as to erode boundaries and undermine the capacity of national control over information flows. In view of these revolutionary communication forces, there has been a proliferating academic interest in the expansion of and the consequences of the internet in China. Particular attention has been devoted to the political and economic implications of digital media technology. In his book titled *The internet in China: Cyberspace and*

*civil society*, Tai (2006) even claims that any study of the internet and ICTs in China is incomplete, if it fails to assess the bureaucratic regulatory apparatuses that closely link to the party-state's political control. Many see China as an ideal site for testing the assumption that the internet is an important democratizing force.

### *Public sphere and civil society*

Drawn from the internet's transformative ability to transcend time and space, intense debates have evolved on conceptions of the public sphere and civil society. Acclaimed as the basis of democracy, the "public sphere" has been utilized to assess the impact of the ICTs on Chinese revitalization of civil society. As widely acknowledged, a very influential conceptualization of the public sphere is based on ideas expressed in Jürgen Habermas' book *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (1989). This work has widely been acknowledged as the foundation of contemporary public sphere theories. According to Habermas, the public sphere mediates between the "private sphere" and the "sphere of public authority":

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.

(Habermas, 1989: 27)

Following Habermas, scholars have extended the conception to propose that every modern society has a public sphere to some extent. For Kraus (2000), "public sphere" can be defined as a collection of ideas and information accessible to broad sectors of society. Hauser conceives "public sphere" as "a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment" (1998: 86). Based on the more general conceptual framework of "public sphere", academics expect that the growing use of the internet

as a communication and socialization tool in China, would provide “new resources that at least have the potential to establish a more open and reasonable public sphere” (McCormick and Liu, 2003: 140) and offer “a new line of hope to empower Chinese civil society in an increasingly networked world” (Tai, 2006: 80). Moreover, Kluver and Qiu (2003) expect the internet to be an essential driving force in the dismantlement of the Chinese state apparatus of social control. Along similar lines, Akhavan-Majid (2004) contends that the internet has largely liberalized the nature of information dissemination in China. News, particularly the big news events, can be spread very quickly to an ever wider audience base and lead to more (and often diversified) sources. The surging public interest aroused by the huge amount of information usually generates vigorous discussion by the public. Many (e.g. Fravel, 2000; Tai, 2006) support this point of view, claiming that the internet has reduced the public’s reliance on a few conventional media for information and has lessened the government’s ability for agenda setting. The single-source news is largely replaced by multiple source news with the facility of the online platform. Even though it may be too optimistic to declare the complete “democratization of information” or the “decentralization of information” in the case of China, some empirical studies at least suggest the positive role of the internet in supporting civil society. Tai’s (2006) case study reveals that the internet has become an empowering tool for Chinese civil society in the field of social movements. The internet, according to Tai (2006), allows the creation of a transformative platform for public communication and discourse and thus expands the scope of public communication through its speed and reach.

### *Censorship and regulations*

Emphasis on the issue of censorship and governmental regulations on the internet has been extremely intense in the case of China. Scholarly works as well as articles usually underscore strategies of how the Chinese authorities control cyberspace, ranging from legislative laws, coercive operations to technological implementations and so on (e.g. Hachigian, 2001; He and Zhu, 2002; Wacker, 2003; Yang, 2003). It is claimed that the Party-state is fostering the growth of the internet and simultaneously

weaving a web of regulations to constrain information regarded as harmful. Hachigian has summarized the strategy of Chinese government towards the internet as “providing economic growth and some personal freedoms, managing the Internet’s risks, and harnessing its potential” (2001: 118). To extend this point of view, Tai argues that though the Chinese government has warmly embraced ICTs and the information era, it does not necessarily mean that the Chinese authorities are willing to “let the liberating and free-wheeling spirit of the Internet run its own course” (2006: 97). Websites that were “deemed politically, ideologically and morally undesirable were blocked at the national gateways” (He and Zhu, 2002: 126). There are policies and regulations aiming at “ensuring the smooth flow of information, preventing external interference, protecting the national industry and the exercise of state sovereignty” (He and Zhu, 2002: 128). By gaining the economic benefits while suppressing the internet’s potential to challenge the government, the Chinese leadership believes that “a well-developed and well-regulated Internet can work to its advantage in strengthening its grip on power and its capacity to win popular support” (Tai, 2006: 97).

It seems that in terms of the forces regarded as influencing online communication in China, scholars above highlighted the political aspect as the most immediate and noticeable dynamic in the Chinese online environment. The Chinese regulatory context appears in the literature to be the most important shaping factor that makes Chinese online environment different to other places. Such a discourse neglects the fact that “all political regimes engage in some forms of censorship” (Deibert, 2003: 506). According to Deibert (2003), state censorship is widely seen in Asian and European countries; some aggressive content filtering systems have been adopted in Arabic and Islamic regimes to block both pornographic sites and political websites; and electronic surveillance exists in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. It would be difficult to find any state around the globe that does not see the necessity of regulating certain aspects of digital communication, despite that there do exist radical proponents of “digital libertarianism” who advocate

completely unrestrained freedom of activity on the internet (Wacker, 2003). Deibert reminds those interested in global democratic governance to “think seriously about the security and design of the communications infrastructure as a constitutive force and material reality” (2003: 504). Therefore, the view that considers China’s distinctiveness only in political terms neglects both the presence of censorship elsewhere and other crucial aspects of the web news genre in China.

Another widely discussed factor that greatly influences the online communication in China is the commercial or economic. Scholarly interest has concentrated on how online media adapt to the competitive market in the context of economic globalization. Dai (2002) argues that China’s status as a developing country has not prevented the Chinese government from taking effective steps to embrace the opportunities and challenges of ICTs; indeed, China is moving towards a digital economy with Chinese characteristics. The Chinese characteristic, as discovered from many economic-based articles, is too often interpreted in terms of political-economic power. The significant commercialization process of the media sector has been noticed by a good many studies (e.g. Chen, 1993; Huang, 1994; Chu, 1994; Zhao, 1998; Lee and So, 2001; Lee, 1994, 2000, 2003). Among those scholarly researchers, some doubt and question the necessary or logical relationship between Chinese economic liberty and media freedom in China (e.g. Heuvel and Dennis, 1993; Yu, 1994); some believe the development in the economic and media sectors would eventually contribute to a transition to democracy in China (e.g. Lee, 1994; Pei, 1994; Huang, 2001). The discourse revealed by those articles suggests that “control over communication is a crucial concomitant of political-economic power” (Schiller, 2005: 79). Much has been written about whether and how the state controls the internet media in a competitive digital market (e.g. Polumbaum, 1994; Chen, 2003; He, 2003). There are also articles elaborating theoretical frameworks that explain the interaction between the state and the media sector in the digital economy (e.g. Lee, 2000). Some consider the media reform as a reinforced controlling power of the media through state and market censorship (Zhao, 1998), while some firmly believe the increasing commercialization

of the media system would deprive the Party of its monopoly on media and the Chinese state would have “lost control of the mass media” (Pei, 1994: 177). To a certain extent, the two branches seem to “have exaggerated the case and provided little solid evidence” (Huang, 2007: 403). The case of control is over stated and other influencing factors, such as social, cultural and technological aspects, have been overlooked.

To sum up, with regard to the review of literature on the internet-based media in China, it is evident that much Chinese media literature seems strongly “control” focused and too often judges from a political or political-economic perspective. Heavy emphasis has been placed on the interaction between internet media and the authoritarian party-state or between the global internet market and government control. A vast body of literature actually falls into two general theoretical models: “dissident vs state” (or “democracy vs control”) and “market vs state”. In light of the first framework, heated debates exist around tensions between the freedom-seeking online media (and/or internet users) and the party-state. The Chinese government is often portrayed as enthusiastically promoting the spread of internet use while keeping a rigid control over online communications. Therefore, the tension between freedom-seekers and controlling government attracts much interest among observers. Drawn from the relevant literature, the answers to whether the internet serves as a transformative power in democratization and in civil society seem to be ambivalent. The relatively short history of the internet and the lack of sufficient empirical evidence make it hard to clarify the ambivalence (Yang, 2006). Scholars are some way from agreeing upon on the internet’s liberating role in the case of China. The “market vs state” scenario has described the Chinese government as a monolithic entity intent on development of the telecommunications and internet infrastructure to develop China’s economy, while gripping tightly onto the online media communication and political superstructure.

Rather than analyzing those contentions further, it is important to question the validity



and practicality of the above framework in the context of China. I deeply doubt the scenario that the predominant debates draw upon is compatible with China's circumstances. The political explanatory framework should not be considered as the only, and in most conditions, even superior perspective in studies of Chinese media. Derived largely from the Western historical experience of shifting from authoritarian to liberated press systems, the "dissident vs state" model views the transformative development of China's internet media in terms of "an ongoing adversarial struggle between freedom-seeking dissidents and authoritarian governments" (Akhavan-Majid, 2004: 554). Yin (2008) questions the applicability of the libertarian theory in the Asian media context, when taking into consideration Eastern and Western philosophical thinking and cultural values. Furthermore, the "market vs state" model leads some authors simply considering the state's role as running commercialized media within its "orbit" (e.g. Gordon, 1997; Zhao, 2000). As Downing (1996) puts it, Western media theories are evolved from and are used to explain a relatively stable political economy. Thus Western media theories seem to "take for granted capitalistic democracy as a static backdrop for media dynamics" (Ma, 2000: 31). As noted, the reconfiguration of the Chinese media and abrupt changes in Chinese society contrast sharply with the situation in the West. The established model of global media studies is probably not fully compatible with Chinese social and media reality. Concepts in Anglo-American paradigm like "liberalism, conservatism, political right, middle and left, public interests, democracy, rights, freedom and individualism are very different from a Chinese perspective" (Hu, 2007: 338). In addition, Huang (2007) argues that the highly political approach is of limited use in the Chinese context and sometimes even misleading by simplifying the media transformations. In the eyes of the mass audience in China, the adoption of the web-based media is a part of the media transformation and indeed it may simply mean "a more accessible, participative and enjoyable media experience in a competitive and diverse media communication market, and not necessarily linked to an ultimate political-ideological end meaning" (Huang, 2007: 404).

### 2.1.3 Neglect of social, cultural and historical factors

Drawn from the above discussion, it is worth noting that social and cultural perspectives have been largely neglected in much academic work concerning issues of the internet in China. A few scholars have acknowledged the gap and point out the problem. Hughes and Silverstone, editors of the journal *New Media and Society*, address this in their themed section on “The internet in China”:

Much has been written about China’s eccentric and intrusive relationship to new media. Much of that writing has been of the knee-jerk variety, lambasting a society for its refusal to accept the openness of the technology. It has also generally been empirically uninformed. Neither the history nor, broadly speaking, the sociology of China has been effectively mobilized in the analysis of the particular dynamics of innovation in this area.

(Hughes and Silverstone, 2002: 139)

Echoing Hughes and Silverstone’s contention, one empirical study has effectively shown the unbalanced trend amongst studies of the internet in China. Kluver and Yang’s (2005) content analysis, as mentioned earlier, indicates that the greatest attention has been paid to two fields: authoritarian control of the internet and the development of the telecommunications and internet infrastructure in China. Kluver and Yang point out that “given the emphasis on China, issues of political control figured in almost all of the articles, including those articles concerning infrastructure development and industry regulation”, while nonpolitical aspects of Chinese society remain virtually unexplored among scholarly studies (2005: 303). It seems that the dominant analytical model tends to mask a number of significant dynamics unique to Chinese culture, history and society. Taking the cultural perspective as an instance, the cultural model of collectivism-individualism (Hofstede, 1980; 1991) might be valuable for a number of media studies, especially comparative studies between Asian and Western contexts. As widely noted, the foundation of Chinese culture is Confucianism. Being an integral part of daily life and a source of social norms, Confucianism glorifies collectivism, which calls for a favouring of state or group

interests over individual interests and desires (Triandis et al., 1988). In contrast, most Western countries, the US as a representative, are often characterized by individualism, which implies that each person is a unique entity separate from the group (Hall, 1976; Spence, 1985). By acknowledging the cultural difference, researchers might be able to design more interesting empirical studies as well as to deliver more fruitful results.

Some have acknowledged the dynamic of the Chinese context, but few have clearly proposed a successful Chinese paradigm with respect to its unique social, historical and cultural background. It is generally agreed that to construct a Chinese model of media studies is not a total rejection of Western paradigms since common concepts do apply to both kinds of society. As mentioned earlier, most Western theoretical frameworks can be fitted into the technology-media research design, but it can be expected that minor adaptations and combinations would be needed in examining the Chinese case. Given the complicated reality of Chinese media system, Huang's (2007) paradigm of "from control to negotiation" is convincing in describing the changing media landscape in the 2000s. This approach does not see the state control or the capital control as the dominant or overwhelming force as some have indicated (e.g. Zhao, 1998, Paradise, 2006). Instead, Huang's model suggests the 2000s as "a period of the start of a transition of media regulation in China from a rigid totalitarian state control model to a state-media-market-society negotiation model" (2007: 405). According to Huang (2007), the concept "negotiation" refers to a bargaining process in which four powers—the state, the media, the market and society—have to consider each other's interests before making any decision. Admittedly, the four forces are not very even and equal, with the party-state monopolizing the overall political power. However, it deserves attention that the media industry in China is at least not a monopolizing game anymore; "'control' is now more often forced to find its way through 'negotiation'" (Huang, 2007: 405). More broadly, the marketization and globalization of the Chinese economy and media commercialization in particular since the early 1990s can be viewed as a result of negotiation between powers of the

media, the market and the society. In the digital age, there is probably much less censorship in China than during previous periods. As Ma (2000) describes, on most occasions, tight media controls have given way to policies seeking to stimulate competition, cut down subsidies, promote economic prosperity and streamline organizational media structures. As a result, the role of today's Chinese media has shifted from a party organ for propaganda to a multiplicity of functions, including educating, entertaining and informing the audience. With the further penetration of the digital media, a few researchers, such as Huang (2001) and Peng (2005, 2006), have acknowledged the proliferating diversification of the popular media-dominated and highly competitive Chinese media market in terms of media forms and media content. A longitudinal review focusing on the trajectory of the internet media's transformation in China may shed light on obvious changes that have been ignored by studies focusing on the above dominant framework. As He (2003) noted, a number of studies support the contention that the media in China, especially after the emergence of the internet-based media, have shifted from a pure "mouthpiece", "state propaganda tool", or "transmission belt" of the Party to an amalgamation of various identities, providing public services, entertainment, and so on.

#### 2.1.4 Sporadic studies on web journalism in China

Drawn from the analysis above, it is evident that China is a rarely studied case regarding the development of the internet as a novel platform for news reporting and transmission, despite the number of Chinese netizens being the largest national total in the world.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, it seems that researchers are less interested in the "micro" level of analysis. Among the sporadic research on digital media in China, much attention has been devoted to how the digital media differ from the old media (e.g. Lee, 2003), or how traditional media respond to the demands of an internet market (e.g. He and Zhu, 2002). Few scholarly articles contribute significantly to a

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<sup>4</sup> According to the semiofficial China Internet Network Information Centre's (CNNIC) latest statistical report (released in January 2010), by the end of 2009, the total number of netizens in China had increased to 384 million, which is the largest in the world. More information concerning the internet profile of China is presented in the following background chapter.

thorough analysis of the process, progress, problem and promise of web journalism in China. Even fewer have written comparative analyses between Chinese web journalism and Western web journalism.

In addition, a majority of the work discussing Chinese journalism online is on the subject of online newspapers. Articles are aimed at shedding some light on how newspapers respond to the demands of an internet market. Massey and Luo's (2005) study show that both multimedia content and interactive utilization were rare or not found at 32 online Chinese newspapers. This echoes the finding of He and Zhu's (2002) study that few internet-based features were presented at the Chinese online newspapers under their analysis. The finding of few or an absence of web-based features among Chinese online newspapers tends to be consistent with that of similar studies in the US (e.g. Tankard and Ban, 1998; Schultz, 1999; Zaharopoulos, 2003; Randazzo and Greer, 2003) and in other Asian countries (e.g. Massey and Levy, 1999). Specific discussion on this issue is elaborated in the literature review of web journalism below.

Concerning previous studies on Chinese journalism online, it is my contention that choosing the online newspaper as the main researching site in studies of Chinese web journalism is both theoretically unconvincing and historically problematic. This approach fails to acknowledge the differences between Chinese and Western media structures. It is another manifestation of the problem of neglecting the unique media context of China. In many Western countries, for quite a long time, popular and authoritative news websites are those operated by traditional big newspapers or those affiliated with national television or radio stations. The *New York Times* (nytimes.com), the *Guardian* (guardian.co.uk), the *New Zealand Herald* (nzherald.co.nz), NBC (msnbc.com), the BBC (bbc.com) and TVNZ (tvnz.co.nz) are a few prominent examples. Reasons behind such a phenomenon are closely related to the brand identity and social position. Those news organizations have long been recognized and accepted by large audiences worldwide, thus it is effortless for them to

advertise their news websites widely. Moreover, these giant news corporations, without doubt, have all greater resources to better equip their online counterparts and in this way, increasing audiences are guided to either of the corporation's outlets or, in most cases, to both traditional and online news forms. However, it is a different story in China. The big national press or television stations have not been as active or quick in shifting to the online environment, and have thus failed to attract substantial traffic. Instead, portal sites became places to go for news online. Several commercial internet media organizations are leading the way in Chinese web journalism. Sina.com, Sohu.com, NetEase.com and QQ.com are amongst the most popular news portals in China<sup>5</sup> (Alexa, 2008). Thus, I argue that studies on Chinese web journalism should pay attention to those portal sites, instead of solely focusing on online newspapers.

To conclude, all of the discussion above, including the generally sparse literature on internet-based media in China, the dominance of Western media models, the few studies at the micro level of Chinese journalism online and the undeniably huge size of the Chinese internet market, make China a promising site for studies of web journalism. Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to contribute to the diversity of global communication study through examining Chinese web journalism in a global context. Additionally, with regard to the particular emphasis on the political-economic power and the general neglect of social and cultural factors, this thesis tends to locate the research within the Chinese context, paying particular attention to social and cultural dynamics of the Chinese media system and the online environment. The following paragraphs are devoted to a literature review of web journalism studies worldwide.

## 2.2 Theoretical framework of new media studies

As the fastest growing medium ever recorded, the internet together with the World Wide Web, perhaps represent the most broadly discussed and most significant manifestation of new media. There is much literature contributing to the internet and

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<sup>5</sup> More information on the portal sites in China is shown in the following background chapter.

the web as new media.

The technologies that have emerged in recent years, principally but not exclusively digital technologies, are new. They do new things. They give us new powers. They create new consequences for us as human beings. They bend minds. They transform institutions. They liberate. They oppress.

(Silverstone, 1999: 10)

Silverstone's summary in the inaugural issue of the journal *New Media and Society* offers a provocative starting point concerning the new media. As a buzzword, the term "new media" is actually a vulnerable and relative concept, for new media are soon no longer new in the ever-changing digital era. Many (e.g. Livingstone, 1999; Flew, 2002) question the temptation to simply list the latest media technology developments and call them new, for it is an inadequate and quickly dated approach. What makes Silverstone's contention so interesting is that his argument does not halt there—if it did, it would be an approach of old-style technological determinism. It is not difficult to simplify new media either in utopian or dystopian means, as Silverstone indicates; it is more important and, of course, not simple to seek the "relationship between continuity and change", and to investigate the "complexities of innovation as both a technological and a social process" (Silverstone, 1999: 10). In other words, rather than simply ask "what are the new media", it is more meaningful to ask "what's new for society about the new media?" (Livingstone, 1999: 60). A good many scholars suggest looking beyond the "newness" in new media and propose to analyze the "newness" of new media with regard to their social and cultural contexts. Echoing this point of view, Flew takes a broad social approach towards new media and highlights the importance of being aware of "how the mediation of communications through technological forms renders communications a form of social practice" (2002: 2). For Flew, the ability to download videos from the internet has been an example of qualitatively "new" media, not so much because it changes the form, but because "it changes the means of distribution and storage, and the associated business models, of

these media” (2002: 2).

To further explore this issue, Lievrouw and Livingstone’s (2002) proposal deserves discussion here. Three aspects, according to Lievrouw and Livingstone, need to be considered in any research concerning the new media:

- the artefacts or devices that enable and extend our ability to communicate;
- the communication activities and practices we engage in to develop and use these devices;
- the social arrangements and organizations that form around these devices and practices.

(Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 7)

Being advocated by many media scholars, Lievrouw and Livingstone’s three-element framework of new media has sensitized analysts to the interdependence between media technologies and social elements, which is the concentration of this thesis. In light of such a definition, technologies are indeed infrastructural, in that they combine other elements as well, such as the communication practices and social organizations. It is essential to explore means in which new media both resemble and differ from the old, in their social and cultural contexts and to analyze the implications and impacts of, as well as the determinants and obstacles to, media change. This point of view is crucial to the study of new media, while has been neglected in a number of previous studies on Chinese internet-based media, as revealed in the previous literature review.

The “artefacts or devices that enable and extend our ability to communicate” are essential elements of the digital media and thus are the main research objects of this study. A traits-based approach has been widely adopted regarding this aspect. Feldman (1997: 3) claims that when turning into the bits of 0s and 1s as the digital form, information becomes “manipulable” (easy to change), “networkable” (can be shared between many and afar), “dense” (storage of large amount of information), “compressible” (can be compressed and decompressed), and “impartial” (any and all media treated the same). All of the information on the internet is in digital form and



therefore captures all the above features. As widely noted, the internet is shorthand for a handful of “different media and modalities” that “make it perhaps the most complex and plural of the electronic media yet invented” (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 6). Then the World Wide Web, which is of great importance in the popularization of the internet, has its own features that enable and extend the ability for communication. With a web browser, one can view web pages that may contain pictures, videos, texts and other multimedia. Thus, journalism on the web is similar to other media forms, but differs significantly in the way it is presented. Web journalism can have “the depth and breadth of newspapers, the immediacy of radios, the typography and resolution of slick magazines and television’s ability to make us eyewitnesses to events” (Carlson, 2003: 53). Then through hyperlinks, one can navigate between various contents on the web pages by simple point-and-click. The availability of search engines offers an easy means for internet users to search information from vast databases. More importantly, nowadays, the emergence and development of Web 2.0 features have reinforced the internet and the web’s potentials. Using the web as a platform, Web 2.0 re-visualizes the internet from perspectives of both the developer and the user, giving each of them innovative ways to use the internet. Web 2.0 websites have an “architecture of participation” that encourages internet users to add value to the application as they use it (O’Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 features enable users to go beyond just viewing and retrieving information; they facilitate users to interact with contents already created and to generate new contents. To personalize or customize web pages according to the individual tastes becomes possible and popular. The “Daily Me”, coined by Negroponte (1995), seems not a myth any more. Moreover, enabled by wikis, blogs and discussion forums, various types of collaboration have emerged on Web 2.0 systems, aiming at harnessing collective intelligence and enhancing social networks.

More precisely, the artefacts or devices play a central role in digital presentation and thus web journalism differs from traditional journalism significantly in the way it is presented. A few academic books concerning this respect are listed below to sketch a general image within this area. Beginning with a clear explanation of how online and

print news differ, Ward's book *Journalism online* (2002) explains what makes journalism online distinctive. The range and amount of sources that one can access and the ability to tap into debates and discussions, together with features of immediacy, multimedia, archiving, interactivity and flexible delivery platforms are making journalism online stand out (Ward, 2002). Along similar lines, in *Digital journalism: Emerging media and the changing horizons of journalism*, Kawamoto (2003) emphasizes the central role of digital presentation in the communication process. He contends that the distinct characteristics of the digital media, namely, hypertextuality, interactivity, nonlinearity, multimedia, convergence, customization and personalization, enable flexibility and creativity that a lot of traditional news formats would constrain. *Web journalism: Practice and promise of a new medium* written by Stovall (2004), offers discussions of the traditional practices of journalism, such as reporting, editing, design, and photojournalism, while presenting how the unique features of the web—capacity, immediacy, flexibility, permanency, and interactivity—provide new storytelling potentials. In short, web journalism is considered to have a good many prioritized merits as compared with print or broadcasting journalism.

Moreover, the theory of remediation proposed by Bolter and Grusin (1999) deserves attention here. As the so claimed “defining characteristic of the new digital media” (1999: 45), the term “remediation” is interpreted as “the formal logic by which new media technologies refashion prior media forms” (1999: 273). The theoretical framework of “remediation” has been widely noted as an apparent effort to revise McLuhan's seminal work *Understanding media* (1964) for the digital media context. Bolter and Grusin propose to de-mythicize new media forms: “as a digital network, cyberspace remediates the electric communications networks of the past 150 years ... cyberspace refashions and extends earlier media, which are themselves embedded in material and social environments” (1999: 183). For Bolter and Grusin, the internet networks are able to remediate all existing media forms into one platform. More significantly, with the development of the Web 2.0 features, cyberspace has the power

to radically transform previous media genres and establish new possibilities of social relationships and connections (Tai, 2006), as exemplified in the cases of blogs, wikis and discussion forums.

With characteristics mentioned above, the internet together with the web has not only enhanced the conventional one-to-many communication model, but also has fostered brand new communication genres, in which “users’ messages can be sent by a heterogeneous user base to a heterogeneous audience” (Tai, 2006: 162). In the internet-mediated communication, every internet user is potentially a viewer as well as a creator. As the internet becomes a web of interconnected nodes where users can be both message receivers and senders in the communication cycle, another trend of research arises, focusing on how the structure of information flows on the internet affects the role of traditional journalists. Newhagen describes the traditional mass media architecture as the hourglass shape that “facilitates a power imbalance between message producers and receivers” (1998: 117). The traditional journalists are at the narrowest point of the hour glass and thus “in a position of power over their clientele” (1998: 117). For Newhagen, this kind of system architecture may not exist on the internet; the architecture in cyberspace “may lend itself to more parity between communication participants” (1998: 117). Therefore, some claim that “journalists are vulnerable to losing their franchise as gatekeepers of news” (Williams, 1998: 34). Nevertheless, I would be cautious in suggesting that gatekeeping, as one of traditional journalists’ principal traits, disappears in the online environment. Rather, gatekeeping has evolved to “commercial gatekeeping” (Hargittai, 2004), “gatewatching” (Bruns, 2003, 2005) or even “gate-opening” (Boczkowski, 2000). Such a digital communication environment offers the potential to shift communication from “allocution” to “consultation”, as Bardoel (1996: 287) observes. Some scholars (e.g. Kawamoto, 1998; Gillmor, 2004) indicate that the traditional function of simply mediating between news events and news consumers now is developed to incorporate tasks more geared to facilitating various information search, content generation, and information exchange actions by and among users.

Instead of talking about new possibilities of the internet alone, discussion of strengths and drawbacks of the internet would be required to paint a more realistic picture. This school of analysis takes practical contexts into account while elaborating the artefacts and devices. It points to the third aspect of Lievrouw and Livingstone's new media theory that focuses on the social contexts around the devices and practices. Ryder and Wilson's (1996) elaboration on "affordances" and "constraints" of the internet is quite comprehensive in this regard and is very useful as a guideline for internet studies. Many have cited or summarized their findings. According to Ryder and Wilson, firstly, the internet offers the potential to access unprecedented amounts of information from multiple sources and the opportunity for free expression, while the participation is limited in practice by literacy, affordability of access and differing communicative competencies. Secondly, barriers such as ethnicity, gender, and age are weaker in the online environment, but the cultural dominance of middle-class white males is obvious. Thirdly, as the network and information grow, the value of participation grows exponentially, but so do the security threats and privacy concerns. Fourthly, the internet provides opportunities to access multiple and interconnected forms of information by hypertexts, while the problem of being "lost in cyberspace" arises in the face of the non-linear browsing. Additionally, though the multiple sources of information are able to augment single sources of information and to compare conflicting points of view, the concern of value and validity from various sources becomes prominent in the absence of filters and gatekeepers. Moreover, the online environment is noteworthy for its current and timely information, but is at some risk of less stable information. For example, the information may be removed or the sites are no longer functional when you want to retrieve the information. Last but not least, the internet is able to create intimacy and locality to some extent, while has difficulties in maintaining remote associations and variances between "online" and "offline" personas. Ryder and Wilson's discussion portrays a general picture of the internet utilization that may roughly hold water in any internet environment, while they are far from precise and complete in specific cyber contexts. Only with close

scrutiny within a particular online environment, can one deliver a more constructive contention. To date, the internet still serves for majority of internet users and on most occasions as a venue for news and information. The main purpose of this thesis is to closely examine how mainstream journalists present news and communicate with the audience via the internet network. The second aspect of Lievrouw and Livingstone's new media framework—how people use the artefacts and devices to perform communication—is indeed the focus of this thesis.

## 2.3 Conceptual framework of web journalism

Before further exploring the conceptual framework, it is important to clarify a key issue here: the thesis is a study of *mainstream* web journalism. Admittedly, in an era fraught with vertiginous changes and surprising novelties in information and communication technologies, new disseminating forms for journalism are continually presenting. A number of platforms, news groups, weblogs, forums, discussion boards and so on, tend to encourage new forms of news. According to Deuze (2003), “mainstream news sites” (e.g. websites of the BBC and the *New York Times*), “index and category sites” (e.g. Drudge Report), “meta and comment sites” (Poynter's Medianews; Europemedia) and “share and discussion sites” (e.g. Indymedia; Slashdot), are key genres that provide a schema to organize the variety of forms of web journalism. In recent years, it is noted that there are increasing media studies in the field of the latter three types. Media work has largely focused on weblog journalism (e.g. Matheson, 2004; Matheson and Allan, 2007), citizen journalism (e.g. Sambrook, 2005), participatory journalism (e.g. Rosen, 2006), and grassroots journalism (e.g. Gillmor, 2004). Despite new manifestations of news continually showing up, it is undisputable that the mainstream news media has contained the most widespread form of news content and has attracted most online news traffic. Therefore, the focus of this thesis is the mainstream news websites providing a selection of editorial news content, be it shoveled from traditional media or originally generated for the web (Schultz, 1999; Kenny et al., 2000). In other words, what I am

going to emphasize is news content produced and/or distributed via the World Wide Web, particularly material created by journalists who work for mainstream news organizations. While blogs, forums and other emerging forms of online news communication are widely acknowledged as significantly influencing mainstream news content both on and offline, they are considered here a distinct phenomenon and treated under the category of alternative media.

Academic research on web journalism, much like the object of the study, is growing rapidly and diversely. This increases the difficulties in locating the relevant scholarly work to the literature review and also raises the risk that any given assessment could be dated or inaccurate in a short time. However, it is the fluid and diverse nature of web journalism that calls for the literature review to locate the sporadic work into an arena of interrelated conversations. As Boczkowski claims, “the more unstable the phenomena and their analyses, the more effort should be put into mapping the territory before embarking upon any particular journey” (2002: 271). Generally speaking, web journalism literature to date can be categorized in three branches: literature on online journalistic professionals, literature on audience (or internet users) and literature on products (e.g. news websites). As defined above, the concentration of this thesis is a portion of the third branch—mainstream news websites.

As elaborated above, the emergence of the internet has remarkably changed the way journalists report news as well as the way information circulates in society. With regard to concepts concerning news produced and distributed via the internet, “web journalism”, “online journalism”, “internet journalism”, and “digital journalism” are the most utilized terms in media scholarship. Generally speaking, all these terms refer to the research, production, and delivery (or making accessible) of news and information via the internet to an increasingly computer-literate audience (Kawamoto, 2003). Being the shorthand for “different media and modalities” (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 6), the internet networks have the ability to remediate all existing media forms into one platform (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Texts, graphics, sounds,

video, animations and so forth are the common manifestations of news on the web. Media scholars are interested in exploring “the communication activities and practices” (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 7) enabled by the internet’s manipulable, networkable, dense, compressible and impartial natures (Feldman, 1997: 3). The following paragraphs will review academic literature and empirical research of the mainstream news in a roughly chronological way.

### 2.3.1 Rosy promises and ideal models

Immediately after the internet emerged as a medium or media, computer-mediated communication studies had been imbued with rosy promises and ideal models. Early academic work on web journalism is more or less dependent on a technologically driven approach. Since the 1990s, thousands of news websites have been launched and millions of internet users have adopted the internet as an important outlet for news. Owing to the leading role of the United States in the development of the internet as a news platform, web journalism studies have been dominated by American based or related theories. To a great extent, studies in Europe, Pacific and even Asian countries have followed American literature within this area. One of the most representative works in the 1990s is *Being digital*. This book was translated into some twenty languages and was a bestseller in the middle of 1990s. Negroponte, as the *Wired Magazine* columnist and founding director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab, described in his book how the rapid development of computers and telecommunication technologies would transform the way people live, think, and interact with one another and with technology. “Computing is not about computers any more. It is about living” (1995: 6), claimed Negroponte. “Like a force of nature, the digital age cannot be denied or stopped. It has four very powerful qualities that will result in its ultimate triumph: decentralizing, globalizing, harmonizing, and empowering” (1995: 229). This book optimistically embraces the digital technology and holds firmly that digital technology would constructively change human’s life. Critics faulted Negroponte’s obvious utopian ideas for failing to consider the economic, political and cultural realities in which technologies evolved.

While Negroponte's thinking is too technologically determinist to be useful in this thesis (see 2.2 above), it was a significant expression of common ideas motivating the development of online journalism. This book in fact has set a hopeful promise for the digital-related research, of course, including the online journalistic studies. Media scholars since the mid-1990s have welcomed the promise that "a whole new journalism" (Quittner, 1995) would arrive with the advancement of information communication technology (ICT). In the early 2000s, hopes were high that a new and more democratic idea of journalism would be supported by the potential of the internet (Hartley, 2000). Pavlik claims at the very beginning of his book *Journalism and new media* that "Journalism is undergoing a fundamental transformation.... A set of economic, regulatory and cultural forces, driven by technological change, are converging to bring about a massive shift in the nature of journalism" (2001: xi).

Among scholarly works, many have compared the internet-based media with traditional media and announced remarkable advantages of the digital media. The internet has the potential to take the best things about traditional media and "wrap them up into a single new product with all the strengths of existing media and few, if any, of the weaknesses" (Carlson, 2003: 53). Journalism presented on the internet was hailed as a "fourth" kind of journalism (Deuze, 1999) that can be functionally differentiated from other kinds of journalism. The ability to choose from multi-formats to present the news story (known as "multimediality"), the opportunity for the public to respond, interact and customize news content (known as "interactivity"), together with the capacity of linking and connecting backgrounds, archives and other resources through hyperlinks (known as "hypertextuality") have been highlighted as "ideal-typical" forms of online journalism by many researchers (e.g. Quinn, 1998; Reddick and King, 2001; Pavlik, 2001). Some contend these features are determining the "added value" of online journalism (Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996), and thus journalists should adjust their reporting strategies accordingly in the internet environment (Deuze, 2001). These ideas have opened up a "rosy beginning" for web journalism, but it does not mean these features can be applied



exactly according to the promises. Being the kernels of web-based media, these features need to be utilized more critically, as “the social arrangements and organizations that form around these devices and practices” usually shape the applicability (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 7).

### *Multimediality*

In the realm of web journalism, scholars generally agree that the concept of “multimediality” means the integration of more than one medium or media formats (Fagerjord, 2003; Deuze, 2004). Much literature on multimedia is inclined to demonstrate how multimedia employs multiple senses and multiple channels of storytelling. Fagerjord (2003) uses “rhetorical convergence” to describe the coming together of different kinds of news presentation in modern online journalism, through means such as texts, photographs, drawings, music, flash animations, video, live coverage, and continuous updates. Concerning the increasing media cross-ownership and improving ICTs, there are high expectations of a fully convergent multimedia journalism in the near future (Stone and Bierhoff, 2002; Lasica, 2002). In 2005, Murdoch announced in a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors: “with the growing proliferation of broadband, the emphasis online is shifting from text only to text with video” (Murdoch, 2005). Growing combinations of various dynamic media forms are expected to augment the traditional text news.

A vast body of early literature underscores the prominent role of multimedia within web journalism. First of all, multimedia journalism online plays an important role in attention-attraction and “smooth navigation”. In the face of the steadily increasing speed of news and information circulation in society, multimedia journalism appears to be an effective way to engage viewers. As early as 1996, Bardoel observed, “the life of public issues is shortened as the publicity process speeds up” (1996: 286). Accordingly, journalistic professionals should adjust to the faster news circulation pattern; otherwise, the audience would “literally be flooded out by the rising tide of information” (Bardoel, 1996: 291). In light of such an assumption, multimedia

journalism is claimed to be a very good way to avoid audiences getting lost in the sea of information. The multimedia content is able to get viewers interested and engaged immediately into the news coverage, since entertainment and journalism, emotion and information have been wrapped up in the same package (Väliaho and Lundgren, 2005). Moreover, Stovall (2004) indicates that the audience, especially the younger generation, are bored of lengthy texts and long for more visual and digestible news. Many researchers also find that the web is not a good place to publish long texts and thus the essential role of online journalism is navigation (King, 1998; Bardoel, 1996; Kawamoto, 2003, Väliaho and Lundgren, 2005). Väliaho and Lundgren (2005) see multimedia journalism as tailor-made for the web, since it uses a layered storytelling approach appealing on two levels. First is a story level, using short texts, photos, audio and video to attract viewers. Such multimedia packages engage viewers' emotion from the very beginning. This kind of story presentation appeals to the majority of the audience and aids in reaching as large an audience as possible. Second is a referential level, with longer texts and perhaps more relevant photos and videos to give interested readers detailed information. Mostly drawn from the experience of media practice in the West, the prevailing literature on the merit of multimediality suggests that multimedia journalism would play an essential role in catching attention and promoting a "smooth navigation" online. Such a point is actually open for debate. Questions remain whether audiences in the East would share these needs and expectations.

More importantly, many have stressed that the multimedia news package online should go beyond mere technical or format combinations, although the explanation for "multimedia" lies largely in the use of more than one type of media form in news products. Kawamoto (2003) emphasizes that multimedia content demands more than mere technical constructions or the combination of various pieces of information in different formats. Instead, multimediality calls for "a true multimedia experience" for internet users (Stabe, 2007). In order to achieve this goal, the multimedia news package goes beyond reporting facts and presenting video and pictures. It should be a

thoughtful media strategy with the end of an accurate, up-to-the-minute, contextual and complete news story (Kawamoto, 2003). Zerba claims that multimedia journalists have moved from “thinking about the inclusion of individual multimedia features” to a more “packaged journalism online”, aiming to give internet users “additional ways to understand information, extending coverage and heightening the users’ experience in taking in a story” (2004: 16, 17). The package should be employed in an integrated way, so as to help with putting news in the context of related material. To further identify the value of multimedia journalism, Deuze (2003) highlights the differences between two kinds of multimedia archetypes—superficial multimediality and the divergent paradigm. A simple combination of information presented in different formats is considered as a superficial form of multimediality. It is merely a convergence of media modalities. As Guay sharply points out, “if multimedia is used with no thought as to the reasons why it is being used, or it has poor lay-out or content it can result in a pointless aesthetic fiasco that needlessly hogs bandwidth” (1995: 5). Then a “divergent paradigm” of multimediality is believed to be able to layer and link much information in a more organized and useful manner. According to Deuze, the divergent paradigm requires that “all parts of the site are developed from a multimedial starting point”, providing the users “several ways into, and through, the site’s contents” (2003: 212). As the news story evolves, the package should also evolve and become more contextual and complete. Deuze (2003) admits the definition for multimedia in journalism seems very similar to his definition for online journalism—journalism on the web, no matter in what kind of format, should be produced almost exclusively for presentation and distribution via the World Wide Web (Deuze, 1999). The theoretical emphasis here lies largely in terms of the originality and newness, not so much in terms of adaptation of existing journalism to different formats. Such a divergent model requires intensive labor and financial support. It becomes particularly problematic when dealing with the video content. As discussed in the previous section on new media studies, what is envisaged by these critics is a remediation of television and the print so as to enhance journalism online (Bolter and Grusin, 1999).

One more aspect that deserves discussion here is “graphic journalism” (Stovall, 2004) that can be very useful to add value to journalism on the web, although this is understudied by researchers. Due to certain restrictions, many websites choose to combine graphics (e.g. pictures, animations and maps) with texts to enhance the reporting and thus bring the event to a wide audience. For example, flash animation can simulate some events that TV journalism successfully covered but the web-based outlet does not have or has not purchased the rights to cover; it can also recreate a situation which journalists failed or were unable to record, such as a murder spot, a car accident, an earthquake and so on. Numbers, locations, processes, history and contexts can be conveyed more effectively, accurately and clearly in these “infographics” (Stovall, 2004). Ytreberg (2009) suggests that the “proper” utilization of graphic journalism could also greatly extend the liveness and enhance the eventfulness of journalism online.

### *Interactivity*

Since the early 1990s, there has been an explosion of the use of the term “interactivity”. This concept takes on various meanings within diverse fields of scholarship. This thesis highlights some of the key explications and models of interactivity in the area of communication studies, especially those relevant to web journalism. Interactivity has been widely referred to as a discriminating characteristic of the online environment. Being such a buzzword, many people use it, yet few define it (Kenney et al., 2000, Downes and McMillan, 2000). Thus, a succinct review of essential literature that identifies various approaches to interactivity is necessarily important here. A very early explication proposed by Durlak contends that “Interactive media systems include the telephone; ‘two-way television’; audio conferencing systems; computers used for communication; electronic mail; videotext; and a variety of technologies that are used to exchange information in the form of still images, line drawings, and data” (1987: 743). This definition is criticized as too narrowly attaching interactivity to specific technologies. It is not very informative.

Rafaeli's (1988) definition of interactivity is perhaps one of the most frequently cited definitions in communication studies. He defines interactivity as "an expression of the extent that, in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions" (1988: 11). Then in 1997, together with Sudweeks, Rafaeli revised that definition to a sequence-related course: "the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages" (1997: 3). McMillan codes Rafaeli's definition of interactivity as "a process-related variable based on relatedness of sequential messages" (2002: 272). Along the line of "interactivity as a process", Newhagen and Rafaeli indicate that interactivity is "the extent to which communication reflects back on itself, feeds on and responds to the past" (1996: 5). This conceptual definition has been adopted by many media scholars (e.g. Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997; Sundar et al., 2003). However, such a "process" centred and dictionary-like definition is problematic in conducting empirical research; thus many have quoted Rafaeli's explanation, while few have operationalized or effectively measured interactivity under such a definition. Jensen defines interactivity as "a measure of a media's potential ability to let the user exert an influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication" (1998: 201). This "influence over content" theory has become popular in later scholarship. Primarily based on variation in direction of communication and control over the communication process, McMillan (2002) proposed a four-part model of "cyber-interactivity". Four aspects—feedback, monologue, mutual discourse, and responsive—are taken into consideration to judge the level of receiver control. The strength of this perception-based model is its relatively clear clarification. However, it is still very complex in nature and certainly for conducting research into journalism texts online. Rather than examining interactivity as a flowing process or as control of information and communication as listed above, another body of literature focuses on micro-aspects of interactivity. To be more interactive, the audience should be able to access more options that have meaning and consequence (Meadow, 1998), to make an

impact on the experience (Bender, et al., 1996; Henderson and Femback, 1998), and to actively explore news, rather than be passively informed (Pearce, 1997). These micro-focus accounts are useful in moving beyond the technological determinist towards the social expectations around a particular genre as it moves into different media. But still, they are not easy to put into practice, because concepts like “meaningful options” and “influential experience” are hard to measure.

With regard to numerous definitions and approaches that explore the concept of interactivity, a helpful and generally agreed method among scholars (Lee, J. S. 2000; Deuze 2001; Stromer-Galley, 2000, 2004; Chung 2008) is to conceptualize interactivity through the distinction between medium interactivity (also known as user-to-system or content interactivity) and human interactivity (also known as user-to-user interactivity). In this study, particular attention has been given to a model of inactive and active interactivity proposed by South Korean researchers Hong et al. (2008). This model was developed in a context of exploring the cultural specificities of the use of interactivity and thus is well suited to the main concerns of this study. In their comparative study of South Korean and American online newspapers, Hong et al. discovered interactive differences and attributed the discrepancies to the cultural difference between the two nations. Such a research design is in line with the focus of my study here. Asian countries, China, Japan and South Korea as representative cases, are widely acknowledged as sharing similar cultural values (e.g. collectivism) that contrast to the Western cultural philosophies (e.g. individualism). It is my interest to employ Hong et al.’s model to conduct the comparative analysis between Chinese and Anglo-American web journalism in terms of the implementation of interactive features. Expectations are that similar results might be shown in my study. According to Hong et al., *inactive interactivity* refers to interactivity that users simply click or read in the cyberspace, while *active interactivity* refers to interactivity that users actively engage in composing messages and creating content on the internet. Though based on users’ behavioural activity, their division of interactivity is quite clear and practically useful for my study here. Inactive interactivity is similar to medium

interactivity or content interactivity. It is interactive communication between users and technology. Active interactivity is similar to human interactivity, which is communication between two or more people that takes place via an internet-based communication channel.

In addition to the general framework above, I advocate conceptualizing interactivity as a multidimensional construct with a series of interactive features facilitating the online news. Specific components or measurable categories of interactive features are able to greatly reduce the complexity of the concept of interactivity. Within this area, Heeter's (1989) six-dimensional construct of interactivity deserves discussion here for its well-defined explication and practical nature. This feature-based model suggests that interactivity as it relates to communication technologies is a multidimensional concept. Six dimensions of interactivity, 1) complexity of choice available, 2) efforts user must exert, 3) responsiveness to the user, 4) ease of adding information, 5) monitoring information use and 6) facilitation of interpersonal communication, are identified in Heeter's interactivity model. This theoretical framework examines interactivity from two sides of the multi-directional flow of information—both the user and the sender of messages. Among the six dimensions, four dimensions emphasize the role of the user whereby interactivity empowers the user and this empowerment is what clearly distinguishes interactive new media from traditional media. The dimension concerned with the potential to monitor system use empowers the senders of messages within the context of online news. At the same time, the audience benefits from customized services which are made possible by this feature. In a website where potential for personalization is high, users can create customized online news, representing and displaying news content according to their interests and needs. Such a construct of interactivity is quite logical. There are clear boundaries between the dimensions; as such, there is little overlap between them. Therefore, this framework has become a reference point within the area of communication study. It has led to a wave of empirical research on journalism online that will be analyzed in the following section.

Based on Heeter's six-dimensional model of interactivity, researchers have contributed a few useful modifications. In their study of English-language online newspapers in Asia, Massey and Levy (1999) add the dimension of immediacy, which I find very important when examining online journalism. This dimension measures the extent to which online media update the coverage of a breaking news event. The higher frequency of update, the higher the level of immediacy dimension is. Massey and Levy claim that immediacy is one characteristic of online news that most clearly distinguishes it from news delivered by traditional print media. This feature is important for it gives online journalism a competitive edge when competing with traditional media in covering news stories. In addition, by reviewing the literature of interactivity, Ha and James (1998) propose "playfulness" as an additional dimension of interactivity, based on Stephenson's play theory. In his book, *The play theory of mass communication*, Stephenson (1967) suggests that one of the most significant functions of mass communication is to facilitate "subjective play" and thus to give people pleasure, an interlude from the pressing matters, such as "work". According to Stephenson, the interaction with various forms of mass communication helps people to create and enhance individual identities, to counter external social control and to express and portray themselves. Stephenson considers the mass media as a subset of mass communication and suggests play theory to be applicable to a broad scope of mass communication. In recent decades, there are attempts to apply Stephenson's play theory in the online environment. Ha and James (1998) interpret play theory briefly as "mass media content is play for the audience, not just information". In opening up a further dimension to the media experience, Stephenson's theory provides insight into the way website design works. The game together with "curiosity arousal device" contributes to a pleasurable experience when consuming the sites. With playful appliances, the website has developed in "a media landscape [that] presents itself as a play-space to be mastered by the individual" (Worsfold, 7 December 2007). Eighmey's (1997) empirical study of consumers' evaluations of five different kinds of websites indicates that in the eyes of consumers, a successful website must combine



both entertainment and information to add value.

Following the powerful implication of Stephenson's individual perspective on the value of play, Ha and James contend that in a strict sense, the playful dimension of interactivity on the web is within oneself; games and other curiosity arousal devices online are solitary gadgets for individuals. Arguably, the individual perspective is too narrow to capture the essences of playful attributes on web-based media. Much of Stephenson's discussion is focusing on newspaper reading and little is about other media consumption. The individual perspective disarms us from noticing interrelations between participants. It is acknowledged that in today's digital era, the playful attributes of the website are not solely enabling interaction between people and computer any more. The early individual interaction between people and technology itself has been largely expanded into the interpersonal interaction, as evident in the increasing number of network games and various online competitions between netizens. Even though this thesis restricts its study of games and other interest arousal devices to those within mainstream news websites and limits the game range as relating to the news events under study, we can still find that a good many playful appliances are network-based between online players. Thus, it might be more productive to connect those network gadgets with the theoretical framework of participatory play or active audience involvement, rather than solitary play. Stephenson reveals that the pleasure of participatory play is rooted in the satisfaction of a good communicative exchange. By offering play, mass communication perform the function of influencing customs, normalizing manners, and giving people something in common to talk about, so as to foster mutual socialization (Stephenson, 1967). Drawn from these assumptions, websites equipped with playful devices contribute to a construct of reciprocal interaction and a promotion of mutual socialization in the process of play. In a broader sense, following the Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga's groundbreaking study *Homo Ludens* (1938), Stephenson sees play in terms of culture: "the study of play, in short, has become the concern of cultural anthropology... playing is a source of culture, giving rise to useful conventions that

permit culture to evolve and stabilize—it teaches loyalty, competitiveness, and patience” (1967: 45-46). This broad aspect is useful for exploring the playfulness of web-based media in today’s global digital media context. It might be interesting to investigate the playful devices offered by websites in different cultures. More importantly, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) suggest that as the first generation of “digital natives”—children who were born and raised in the digital world—are coming of age, the world would be reshaped and transformed in their image. In order to attract the net-generation, it is widely noted that news websites have to be both interesting and informative. Playful attributes emerge as significant for the study of website interactivity in the twenty-first century.

To connect the specific interactive features with Hong’s general theoretical framework elaborated above, inactive interactivity encompasses four elements of Heeter’s (1989) construct of interactivity, namely, “complexity of choice”, “effort users must exert”, “monitoring information use” and computer “responsiveness”. The “navigational interactivity” and “adaptive interactivity” proposed by Deuze (2001) also fall into this kind of inactive interactivity. Active interactivity includes Heeter’s (1989) “responsiveness” (human response), “ease of adding information”, “facilitation of interpersonal communication” to some extent, and part of Ha and James’ “playfulness”. The “functional interactivity” (Deuze, 2001) also belongs to this level of interactivity.

One more significantly important aspect relating to the study of interactivity is the discussion of the Web 2.0 platform. The term ‘Web 2.0’ is commonly associated with web applications and services that facilitate users’ creation and participation, as well as interactive information sharing and collaboration on the web (O’Reilly, 2005). These interactions are possible because “Web 2.0 applications enable users with little technical knowledge to construct and share their own media and information products” (Harrison and Barthel, 2009: 157). Examples of Web 2.0 applications include search functions, links, tags, blogs, Twitter, wikis, RSS, social networking

sites and so on. The web 2.0 applications and services are of great importance to the study of interactive features, since they facilitate “dynamic interactions between clients and servers”, “engaging webpage displays” and ultimately “direct, interactive and participative user-to-user interactions” (Harrison and Barthel, 2009: 157). More precisely, the main interest to the study here is the utilization of the Web 2.0 platform in the online journalistic environment. The application of a wide variety of Web 2.0 features is of great value to the study of the interactivity of news websites.

In short, interactivity has been the single most studied aspect of web journalism. A common approach is to list an array of features that supposedly represent interactivity. It should be noted that the characteristics discussed above can only be the measurements of the presence of interactive features on the news websites. It is important to bear in mind that the presence of those features alone does not effectively prove how or if the interactive characteristics are presented in a way that encourages their take-up. As Katz (1994) states, many news websites are just producing an illusion of interactivity and are making little effort to give interactive options on their sites the kind of serious attention they deserve. That is to say, there is a significant difference between availability and the use of interactive features on news websites. The mere presence of those features does not necessarily speak to the levels or quality of interactivity in online journalism. Interactive features also deserve close examination of their qualities.

Moreover, whether these interactive features are straightforwardly applicable to journalism online, or more precisely, to Chinese web journalism, calls for close scrutiny. The features and devices mentioned above, are useful elements for comparative studies at the micro-level. However, much of the above discussion is devoted to “rosy promises” and “ideal models” that may be problematic to fit within the journalistic reality. More importantly, largely drawn from Anglo-American research, these theoretical accounts might be unevenly shared world wide. In particular, given the uniqueness of Chinese culture and society, and complexities of

Chinese media system (see background introduction in chapter 3), this study tests out the applicability of the prevailing Western models in Chinese context.

### *Hypertextuality*

Hypertextuality refers to the extent of interconnectivity of individual (parts of) texts in “an extended chain of integrated content” (Oblak, 2005: 93). Drawn from a large amount of literature concerning the role of hypertextuality in web journalism, three aspects, namely, context-provision, non-linear approach and different uses of internal and external hyperlinks, are valuable in the field of online journalism studies. To begin with, the use of hyperlinks or hypertexts in news websites may contribute to a shift of journalistic practice from a condensed-news approach to a “contextualized journalism” strategy (Pavlik, 2001: 23). A prominent journalism organization, journalism.org (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism), attaches great importance to contexts in journalism: “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth. Democracy depends on citizens having reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context” (Principles of Journalism<sup>6</sup>). In this view, facts alone are far from enough; “providing information about information” becomes an important task for online journalists (Deuze, 1999). The hypertextual trait of the web may best serve this linking demand. Bolter claims that hypertexts are closely related to the global communication network “where no one writer or reader has substantial control and consequently no one has substantial responsibility” (1991: 29). Hyperlinks enable viewers to reach various kinds of related information, ranging from archives, backgrounds, original documents, to multiple perspectives over a particular topic. Dahlgren (1996) claims this would be an excellent solution for the eternal problems of journalists when facing newswriting: “how much familiarity they can assume on the part of the audience” with an ongoing issue. Through hyperlinking, “completeness and context” will be the new aim in terms of newswriting (Kawamoto, 1998: 186), compensating a “commonly heard criticism of traditional news” (Kawamoto, 2003: 26). The practice of journalistic professionals then might become less one of selection

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<sup>6</sup> Available at: <http://www.journalism.org/resources/principles> (accessed 6 June 2008).

and more one of analytical structuring of the widest possible range of information (Fredin, 1997). Burnett and Marshall conceptualize hyperlinks as not only a technology of connection, but also “a transformative aesthetic form of expression” (2003: 81).

Moreover, hypertextuality enables a non-linear and dynamic approach of news display and processing, which can be regarded as a journalistic revolution of abolishing the traditional linear strategy. The classical inverted pyramid model of storytelling in the press is said to be no longer suited for the online environment. Under a non-linear and dynamic approach, the news story online should be structured as a “matrix” of different “lexia” (chunks of news contents), and linked to a primary “anchor text” (the essential topic of the news) (Hall, 2001: 66-69). In other words, the traditional reporting task of news content delivery should become one of information expansion. News reporting and editing should concentrate on “creating narrative structures that facilitate user navigation through a variety of information resources” (Huesca, 2000: 7). The use of hyperlinks or hypertexts in the online environment has developed as a way to enhance the availability of information and equip users with diverse routes to consume the information online according to their own interests. In Hall’s words, the utilization of hypertexts might be usefully seen “as a particular trajectory through a series of texts rather than merely the texts themselves” (2001: 66). Through those hyperlinks, it is possible that audiences would create their own path when consuming the news, either concisely or comprehensively. By doing so, Bardoel (2002) suggests that news reporting via the hypertexts has blurred the line between different types of news (eg. print and broadcasting), and genres of news (e.g. reporting and commentary). For Mitra and Cohen (1999), the fundamental characteristics of the web lie in the “self-conscious” hypertextuality and “seamless intertextuality” that constantly invite surfers to move on to another textual node. The presumption of reading to the end is replaced by the expectation that “the reader will “explore” and “surf” to follow the links that appear in the text” (Mitra and Cohen, 1999:186). As will be explored in the background chapter to follow, the uniqueness of the Chinese

online news market and internet users' profiles raise the possibility that such expectations might be culturally specific to the West, and therefore require testing in Chinese contexts.

In addition, it is important to notice the different uses of different hyperlinks. Internal links refer to other texts (or sections) within the site, while external links refer to texts or sites located elsewhere on the internet. Deuze argues the external and internal hyperlinks are two quite different kinds of hypertextuality, for "one opens up new content, the other in fact leads to a spiraling down of content" (2001: 5). For Deuze, if the site only has internal hyperlinks, it actually tells the public that the "worldwide" web does not exist. Some even believe the external links can increase media transparency and credibility by referring readers directly to sources (Fredin, 1997; Gahrn, 1998; Heinonen, 1999). By applying network theory to the web structure studies, Barabasi and Albert (1999) find that distributions of the web follow a power law of growth and preferential attachment, which implies that the network is growing and nodes wish to link themselves to hubs with the most connections. Accordingly, when choosing which web page to link to, most will choose ones that are already heavily linked. Thus, there are a small number of pages (known as hubs) that have thousands of links; while the majority of web pages have very few links. As increasing pages and links appear, older websites usually have a greater chance of being linked to than those that are young. In this way, the very growth of a network favours the original nodes, according to Barabasi and Albert. On the basis of the network theory, Tremayne (2004) examines the use of hyperlinks in online news stories. His study concludes that the use of links in web news is growing in ways predicted by network theory and news stories may become both event-driven and context-driven in web-based media.

In short, the literature suggests that the potential of the use of hyperlinks and hypertexts, either internal or external, is to better inform people through different kinds of digital convergence and different levels of depth. Again, we have to

acknowledge that the above revolutionary framework might not be taken up everywhere, since economic, social and cultural factors might shape the development of the journalism online.

### *Summary of the early literature*

Early studies of online journalism tend to be overwhelmingly driven by the technological innovations. The belief is that technologies have an inevitable and tremendous power to drive journalistic professionals' practices and social changes. Drawn from early assumptions, online journalists are responsible for selecting the best media format(s) to convey news stories (multimediality), setting options for feedback, interaction and customization (interactivity), and connecting stories, background resources and other related information via hyperlinks (hypertextuality). The above three qualities are mentioned in almost all early articles concerning web journalism. It is the "ideal-typical" form of web journalism that has been hailed by numerous new media academics. Domingo identifies this trend of studies as "normative and prospective studies", emphasizing utopian proposals that portray innovative paths for online journalism (2008: 15). Many agree that these utopian proposals are helpful in delineating the innovative course for web journalism. The ideal models, by and large, are leading to a more attractive, transparent, and comprehensive web journalism. With those key features, a "network journalism" would be taking shape (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001). To borrow Bardoel's term, one can envision a major shift of journalism, from "orientating journalism" to "instrumental journalism" (1996: 298). The emphases on file, interactivity, news with context, meaningful information and public debate are the key driving forces to the construction of "instrumental journalism". The potential of the internet offers the scope for shifts "from offering content to context", "from the provision of facts to the provision of meaning", "from collecting information to directing the social flow of information and public debate" (Bardoel, 1996: 283, 297). Despite the enormous discussion on novel traits of internet media, increasing numbers of scholars point out that it is unrealistic in picturing those bright promises and ideal models as necessary outcomes of the development of web journalism. Some argue

that the revolutionary nature of ICTs has been exaggerated. Domingo (2005) indicates that numerous media commentators tend to emphasize the innovative effects of new technologies rather than the processes that generate them. The main focus of much literature on web journalism is on potential rather than the reality (Quandt, 2003). Lievrouw and Livingstone contend that it “can be characterized more useful in terms of, first, the particular ways that they are both the instrument and the product of social shaping, and second, their particular social consequences” (2002: 8). The following paragraphs are to discuss the potential within realistic contexts.

### 2.3.2 Empirical research—testing previous ideal models

Following those promises and theoretical assumptions, another wave of internet media studies has focused on the empirical research aiming at testing those ideal models. Particular attention has been devoted to the study of the previously much-acclaimed “essential” nature of online journalism. Much of the empirical finding shows a sluggish adoption of the internet’s attributes at mainstream news websites. A wide range of contributing factors, such as economic, journalistic and audience-related issues, have been associated with the slow development of these features at news websites.

#### *Multimediality*

To date, empirical studies on multimedia news online or multimedia news packages at news websites have been limited. Zerba’s (2004) comment that “little research has been conducted regarding multimedia journalism” still applies, somewhat surprisingly. Within the limited studies, the empirical research basically shows the use of multimedia contents is scarce among news websites. Researchers usually deconstruct the multimedia concepts into observable elements, such as the provision of photo galleries, audio and video, to conduct the practical research. In a study of more than 400 daily online newspapers in the US, Tankard and Ban (1998) conclude that most were simply employing the website to mirror or reproduce the content of the printed version and few had ventured into multimedia. Later research echoes this result. Greer



and Mensing's (2004) analysis of newspaper websites shows a modest improvement on the aspect of multimedia content. Then some claim that most websites hardly use multimedia options (e.g. Sundar, 2000; Zerba, 2004) and some insist that the contemporary multimedia practice tends to merely replicate and combine existing journalistic practices (e.g. Quinn and Trench, 2002; Boczkowski, 2004b). The much-discussed multimedia packages that aim to offer a heightened user experience are not commonly found within the empirical research.

Economic, journalistic and audience-related issues are the most talked about factors explaining the reluctance or slow adoption of multimedia materials at news websites. In the interview-based research conducted by Thurman and Lupton (2008), quite a few editors and managers from UK online news organizations revealed their concern at the high cost involved in producing multimedia content or purchasing television content. Website editors believed there was huge opportunity in video, but were much concerned about whether the advertising revenue they hoped for would come to the news provider in a "world of increasing consumer control, niche content and fragmented attention" (Berman et al., 2007). Moreover, in terms of journalistic practice, multimedia production is usually associated with significantly more work, extra training for journalists to work across multiple platforms, and the management and recruitment of multimedia journalists. Thurman and Lupton find that editors are keen to embrace multimedia and video storytelling, but "the burden of extra work had created some friction" (2008: 443). Additionally, "representations of the users", together with organizational structures and work practices, are summarized by Boczkowski (2004b) to be the key factors that shape the adoption of multimedia and interactive technologies in online newspapers. Boczkowski suggests that "members of online newsrooms have a vision of what kind of users they would like to reach, and this vision shapes their adoption of new technical capabilities" (2004b: 205). Two aspects are relevant here, "users' technical expertise and their role as either consumers or producers of content", according to ethnographic case studies of innovations in three online newsrooms in the US (Boczkowski, 2004b: 205). Noticeably, the

contributing factors listed above are overwhelmingly drawn from the Western empirical research. To put it in a Chinese context, it is my interest to explore whether these factors apply equally there and whether there are any other factors (e.g. cultural philosophies) that affect the use of multimedia contents.

### *Interactivity*

The majority of researchers, starting from the conceptual framework detailed above, tend to look for the presence or varying degrees of realization of those features to assess the interactivity of a given news website. Rubrics of measurable elements are constructed to quantify the exact percentage of interactivity for the websites under analysis. More precisely, based on the presence of functional choices, bulletin boards, email links, feedback forms, chat rooms, discussion forums, search engines and so on, interactivity of news websites are quantitatively measured. Content analysis dominates the empirical studies within this domain and a great majority of studies suggest low levels of use of interactive features. Taking the online discussion forum as an example, on a worldwide scale, Kenney et al. (2000) found only 17 percent of the websites providing forums. The empirical research in American online newspapers showed only 33 percent offered forums (Schultz, 1999), while Asian news websites had an even low proportion of 20 percent (Massey and Levy, 1999). As mentioned earlier, Heeter's six-dimension interactive model has been widely acknowledged as specific and measurable. A number of scholars, including Ha and James (1998), Kenny et al. (2000), Massey and Levy (1999), all adopted this model to construct measurable options to conduct their research. On the basis of Heeter's conceptual framework, Ha and James (1998) added additional feature-based elements, such as games, surveys, and other curiosity arousal devices, to further examine interactivity. Kenny et al. (2000) adopted Heeter's six-dimension model to code 100 online newspapers and found the level of interactivity to be on average low. Echoing that result, Schultz's (1999) research shows a very low level of interactivity based on content analysis of various interactive options of online media in 100 online newspapers in the United States.

Recent years have witnessed a number of parallel studies that closely follow the previous research. Researchers still employ content analysis to explore key aspects of online news websites. Spyridou and Veglis's (2003) research of online newspapers in Greece finds the forms and expressions of interactivity are very limited. Rosenberry's (2005) study focuses on links and interactive elements to examine whether these devices serve as better public communication. Though a few new forms of interactive features (e.g. blogs, links to community sites) had been taken into consideration, Rosenberry's findings still resemble the discovery from early research that "few newspapers are using the Internet's interactive technologies to improve the coverage of public affairs" (2005: 61). Along similar lines, a content analysis of online news in 16 European countries reveals the absence of advanced features in web news (Van der Wurff and Lauf, 2005). To sum up, empirical studies have overwhelmingly indicated the reluctance or conservativeness of mainstream news media to react to user generated content via interactive features. Interactivity is regarded as one of the least developed options in online news websites, despite the fact that it has gained the greatest focus in analysis and empirical research.

Concerning reasons for the low rate of interactivity usage, previous studies have mentioned a wide variety of related issues. Boczkowski (2004b) and Domingo (2005) made clear that the adoption of innovations in the newsroom is not solely determined by the availability of technologies, but it is also shaped by the broader social context in which the technology is to be employed. The use of interactive features at news websites is increasingly viewed as an outcome of the complex interaction between professional, organizational, economic and social factors (Paterson and Domingo, 2008). Through in-depth interviews with editors from established online news media in the UK, Thurman (2006) presents a detailed and illuminating report of the conflicts between the journalistic professionals' gatekeeping roles and their perceptions of user participation. Additionally, Thurman shows how legal, technical, commercial and personnel considerations impact on the adoption of user generated content in online

newsrooms. Along similar lines, by interviewing newsroom staff, Paulussen and Ugille conclude that the sluggish development of participatory journalism in online newspapers is often due to “newsroom structures, work routines and professional beliefs rather than unwillingness among professionals to open up the news production process to user contributions” (2008: 24). In short, empirical research firmly suggests that the adoption of user generated content in mainstream news websites is hindered by several contextual factors on different levels of the newsroom organization. Though this study does not focus on newsroom practices, the importance of contextual factors reinforces the value of the study’s exploration of a broad range of factors in shaping Western and Chinese online journalism differently.

### *Hypertextuality*

The literature suggests that the essential nature of the World Wide Web is to be connected. However, quite a few empirical studies find that few of today’s news websites employ internal hyperlinks in an effective manner and the potential of external hyperlinks is insufficiently explored. Tankard and Ban (1998) selected news websites from newslink.org to analyze hypertext links. Their findings showed 94 percent of articles in their coding sites did not include a single link. Jankowski and Van Selm (2000) found that very few websites provided extensive external hyperlinks. This is in line with Deuze’s (2001) findings that mainstream news websites generally offered internal hyperlinks, but provided very few links pointing outwards. Oblak’s (2005) study of Slovenian online newspapers shows that only 13 percent of homepage news had external links, while internal links were quite common (62 percent). A similar trend is found in online news productions in Flanders. Paulussen (2004) reveals that all Flemish news sites under analysis contain hyperlinks to other sections within the site, but “few of them are characterized by in-depth news reporting and integration of hyperlinks to sources, archival documents and/or related (background) information”. Tremayne’s (2005) study found that the use of outbound hyperlinks of national news websites in the US was less frequent than a few years previously, as organizations built up its own archive of web content. According to Tremayne’s

observation, the website of the *New York Times* used to offer outbound links sporadically, while since 2001, the addresses of external websites no longer appeared as hyperlinks. Users needed to cut and paste the address into their browser. Other American news websites have followed this fashion. A survey of online newspapers in the US indicates that while most newspapers provide links to their advertisers' sites, less than half provide links to other news sites that could have enhanced information for their readers (Peng et al., 1999).

Concerning reasons behind the generally insufficient adoption of hyperlinks, many have pointed out the editorial, commercial and organizational factors. Dimitrova et al. (2003) suggest that online newspaper in the US use hyperlinks as a gatekeeping tool. They contend that "online newspapers are more often than not keeping the gate to the vast information available on the Internet closed" through "choosing certain hyperlinks and ignoring others" (Dimitrova et al., 2003: 412). Similarly, Tremayne (2005) sees news websites in the US as "gated cybercommunities". Therefore, US users are "increasingly isolated from a world of ideas and points-of-view" (Tremayne, 2005: 38). Moreover, commercial concerns are likely to make websites very cautious of letting "viewers escape their 'family' of related businesses" (Cohen, 2002: 541). Despite the finding that external hypertextuality is a generally unusual feature for all media formats, Oblak's (2005) study shows that online-only news organizations employed more external links than online newspapers. Such a finding reveals that the media structure also influences the use of hyperlinks. This point might be particularly helpful to examine the Chinese case, since the mainstream web news genre in China is constituted by both online-only news media and online versions of traditional media. My study attempts to explore the above issues within both Chinese and Western contexts and to see whether there are discrepancies and changes after several years' development.

#### *Summary of the empirical research*

Dramatically contradicting the high expectations addressed in the early literature,

empirical studies of news websites in a broad range of countries (mostly in the West) consistently sketched a picture of web journalism lacking multimedia and interactive content, and primarily relying on internal hyperlinks. Deuze defines the time period ranging from 1993 to 2001 as the “first generation” of news media on the web. By summarizing a number of media scholars’ empirical findings of the “first generation” of online media, Deuze indicates that “most of the websites do not offer any “online extra” in respect to the traditional version of the medium; they do not use hypertextuality, multimediality nor interactivity” (2001: 2). To meet the ideal-typical online journalism, newsrooms have to undergo quite a few changes, such as “tough choices about values, goals and standards”, as well as commercial, management and organizational impacts (Deuze, 2001: 13).

Recent studies still follow the same models and deliver similar results. Quandt (2008) conducted a comparative content analysis of 10 online news media sites in France, German, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. By studying the formal characteristics and 1603 full articles, Quandt found that these news websites had much in common, such as a similar formal structure, the lack of multimedia content and options for direct interaction with the journalists, a fairly standardized range of article types, and absent source/author attributions. The conclusion of his research states: “Online journalism ... is basically good old news journalism, which is similar to what we know from “offline” newspapers” (Quandt, 2008: 735). Quandt attributes his findings mostly to the traditional news habits of both journalists and audience. Journalists are “following the traditional news values, which reflect the relevance for the user”, and users are highly likely to “just want their usual news—fast and reliably” (2008: 735).

Drawn from the discussion above, the findings risen by web journalism studies “define an almost catastrophic landscape for online journalism” when the actual practice is “mirrored to the utopian ideals” (Domingo, 2005: 26). Concerning the sharp contrast, researchers have suggested various explanations, ranging from

journalistic traditions, editorial difficulties, commercial pressures, management adjustment, audience-related concerns and so on. It seems that a good many contributing factors are shaping the developing course of web journalism. There has not been a generally agreed dominant explanation or implication. Nevertheless, the following section attempts to view the above issues from other angles, and propose an alternative approach to study journalism online.

### 2.3.3 Useful alternative approach to the study of web journalism

The discussion above suggests that the whole ideal-typical versus reality problems in the literature indeed open up the field for more inductive and grounded research approaches. Instead of constraining the angle of view on organizational, journalistic and audience perspectives, I propose to bring broader historical, social and cultural contexts into consideration. More importantly, I call for alternative approaches to study web journalism globally, such as research with a longitudinal focus, studies within non-Western countries, comparative analysis across countries, and investigations of textual news online. These approaches would effectively bring into focus ongoing processes and changes in the online journalistic practice, as well as identify both similarities and dynamics of different versions of the web news genre world wide. In short, the discussion below aims to broaden the relatively narrow research scope in previous studies of web journalism.

Firstly, few recent studies have employed a historical perspective that could visualize the progress of web journalism. Most empirical research is short-term focused and is used to compare the ideal framework directly with the reality. Results drawn from this kind of study emphasize what has not happened over what has happened, and therefore characterize the reality of practice as disappointing. Recent studies seem to lack a contextual and historical foundation (Deuze, 1999); few have taken a historical perspective to examine web journalism, so that the development of web journalism over time has been largely neglected. As Boczkowski discovers, “there has been a dearth of historical analyses about the evolution of online newspapers, and the

relationships between past attempts and current developments” (2002: 278). In fact, the research conducted by Greer and Mensing (2004) is quite convincing concerning the development. Greer and Mensing examined the evolution of news sites features of 83 American online newspapers, ranging from 1997 to 2003. Their findings suggest that online newspapers never stop innovation and journalistic professionals have kept on adapting their news websites. Most of the features grew over time and websites are becoming “more sophisticated in news presentation” (2004: 98). Editor’s emails, animation, archives and infographics were increasingly presented and some even became widespread standards. Audio and video grew dramatically and forums rose to be present in 75 percent of sites. In sharp contrast to the pessimistic results of most short-term focused research, studies undertaking a historical perspective make the progress of web journalism evident. Furthermore, despite the fact that most innovative samples of interactive options are found outside mainstream news websites (Deuze, 2003), it does not necessarily prove that the mainstream journalism is dreadful at all. Instead, it is acknowledged that even with few interactive options, some mainstream news websites are still attracting huge online traffic. They are considered as offering good journalistic service by providing accurate and up-to-the-minute news information.

Secondly, numerous studies were conducted in the context of the United States and Europe; web journalism research in other countries is scarce. Even given the critically referential role of the US and Europe in the internet and internet-related research, it is still disputable that those empirical findings can hold water and be applied directly to other countries. Some authors (e.g. Singer, 1998; Paterson, 2004; Paterson and Domingo, 2008) have acknowledged this problem and called for a more comprehensive methodology to examine the evolution of web journalism. As Paterson (2004) points out, there is a vast body of ethnographic literature analyzing traditional media since the 1970s, but there is virtually no equivalent literature in the field of new media studies. In a recent book *Making online news*, Paterson and Domingo (2008) advocate an ethnographic approach to study online journalism. It is the guiding



premise that “only ethnographic methodologies derived from anthropological and sociological traditions can come close to providing an adequate description of the culture and practice of media production, and the mindset of media producers” (Paterson, 2008: 2). Dahlgren notes that “we need to study the practices and circumstances of cyberjournalism both at the macro, institutional level as well as at the level of concrete daily practices” (1996: 70). Towards a more critical and realistic set of research priorities, the ethnographic approach invites researchers to take the social context and historical factors into account when examining web journalism. With emphasis on historical perspectives and concrete local factors, the ongoing processes and changes would become visible (Boczkowski, 2004a).

Thirdly, it would be fruitful to employ a comparative approach, especially comparisons across countries, to examine news websites. This strategy enables one to have an insight into both universal trends and local singularities. To date, as Domingo summarizes, news website studies have “highlighted the commonalities rather than the differences, but we know little about the variations in contextual and processual factors shaping online journalism in different settings” (2005: 36). Thomson et al. extend this point by claiming that “comparative studies of media variation and variability around the world are few and far between”, especially the work focusing on “comparison of news reporting discourse across the diversity of the world’s journalistic cultures” (2008: 227). After conducting a comparative research project on the hard news reporting across English, French, Japanese and Indonesian journalism, Thomson et al. (2008) find it difficult to gauge the similarity or difference of the genres, styles and rhetorical workings of news reporting language. They admit that their work remain unclear in terms of “the degree to which different languages and cultures have developed their own individual journalistic styles and structures” (Thomson et al., 2008: 227). Poor (2007) explored four computer news portals in Spain, Japan, Germany and the United States respectively. To his surprise, findings show little overlap between the sites under analysis over the sample week. The four sites are different in many ways due to unique national cultural, linguistic and

historical elements. More surprisingly, the East/West split is unclear. Indeed, the Japanese site had more in common with the American site compared with those two European sites (Poor, 2007). As Peng (2008) suggests, different newsroom cultures and practices between different news media may result in different news frames. For McQuail (1992), differences in news coverage are virtually self-evident, for no newsgathering and reporting system are basically apolitical, non-ideological, and non-partisan. Quandt's lately study supports this view and highlights that "there is no 'World Wide' journalism on the Web, but a system of clearly defined language or even national zones" (2008: 719). Domingo (2005) summarizes the more critical and contextual web journalism research as a "constructionist approach to technological innovation" (2005: 26). He even envisions that there is also room for another trend of "action research" in which researchers become involved in the online newsroom and develop more realistic approaches based on the "active collaboration between scholars and professionals" (2005: 36). I tend to agree with Kopper et al. that the research domain of web journalism is "a landscape in the process of discovery" (2000: 500).

Last but not least, empirical studies on web journalism often solely concentrate on the novel traits of the internet media, and little attention has been devoted to studies of textual news online. Despite the increasing popularity of multimedia and interactive news on the web, it is an undisputed fact that news in texts is and will for some time still be the essential component of web journalism. Hence, it is worthwhile including textual news analysis within the study on web journalism. Various dynamics in the news flow, such as sources, balance, variety, contexts, comprehensiveness and story length, actually play an important role in shaping the news frame and media discourses. It is my great interest to explore these mass media concepts in the digital environment within different countries. A specific theoretical framework for the textual news analysis is presented in the chapter on theory and method.

Drawn from all of the discussion above, the gaps shown from the review of previous literature and empirical research on web journalism can be summarized as: a sparse

literature on the internet-based media in China; heavy emphasis on political-economic implications; the neglect of social, cultural and historical factors; the dominance of short-term focused content analysis; and the restriction of research areas, particularly the lack of historical perspective and comparative analysis. This thesis is an attempt to fill at least some of the gaps listed above. Concerning the huge internet market and the sparse literature and research on Chinese internet-based media, I propose China as a promising site in the realm of web journalism study. By comparing Chinese mainstream news websites with those in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, this thesis qualitatively explores distinctive features of web journalism in China. Specific Chinese contexts have been taken into account while discussing the features and implications. Particular attention has been devoted to how Chinese web journalism has developed within its economic, social and cultural contexts. The following chapter begins this account through an introduction to the Chinese context for web journalism.

### 3. Background Introduction

Mainly owing to the language barrier, people other than Chinese are not familiar with Chinese media, let alone the media system and the development of Chinese ICTs in recent decades. This chapter aims to delineate a general picture of mass media in China as a background support for a better understanding of Chinese web-based media. Being part of Chinese media system, the internet media carries a handful of similar responsibilities as traditional media in China, for example, “political propaganda tools”, “competitors in the media marketplace” and “the provider of a public service” (Hu, 2007: 337). It is important to take the overall media system into consideration when closely examining Chinese online journalism. In addition, the elaboration of historical developments shows that Chinese internet together with its web-based media is relatively young, when compared with the Anglo-American case. Despite the short history, the number of internet users in China has increased exponentially. By the end of 2009, 81.5 percent of Chinese internet users (384 million) have consumed online news, which was the largest number in the world (CNNIC, January 2010). The traditional media (e.g. CCTV), news agencies (e.g. Xinhua News Agency) and portal sites have all participated in the online news market. The competition in the field of web news provision is severely intense in China. All of these background factors have to a greater or lesser extent influenced the development of Chinese web journalism, and thus are worthwhile dwelling upon in this chapter.

#### 3.1 Chinese media system

During the recent decades, China has been engaged in a process of rapid transition from a rigid centrally planned economy to a vibrant market-based economy, from a highly centralized social system to a more diverse and stratified social structure. The vast economic and social changes have brought about significant transformations in China’s mass media system. Despite enormous social and economic changes, communism is still the official ideology and has an unshakable position in the

Chinese constitution. Therefore, China becomes a unique site for studies of media transformation amid a vigorous economic revival while maintaining a Communist political system. A clear understanding of China's overall media system in the midst of tremendous changes is of great importance to the further analysis of Chinese media.

Among the analysis of Chinese media system, Hu's (2007) three-feature paradigm is quite convincing and comprehensive in understanding the complexities of the media structure in China. Hu proposes three distinctive natures of the Chinese media system —“single ownership, dual system”, “the contradictory role of media in society”, and “the uncertainty in media policy and media institutions” (2007: 336, 337). The three characteristics have accurately depicted the general framework of Chinese media system. Firstly, in terms of property, all media in China are state-owned property, while private investment is welcomed in some practical areas of media industry, such as advertising and content producing. Due to this belonging-to-government nature, Chinese media are not independent and “the government always has the final say” (Hu, 2007: 336). Secondly, media in China carry multiple responsibilities that would be separated in some Western countries as state-owned, commercial and public-owned media systems. In other words, Chinese media are “preeminently political propaganda machines”, then “competitors in the media marketplace” and lastly “the provider of a public service” (Hu, 2007: 337). The triple roles appear contradictory in terms of Western media theory, while are crucial in understanding the nature of Chinese media. Thirdly, China's media are neither companies nor corporations, but organizations. The government manages the media on behalf of the Party. Hu (2007) considers this point as an uncertainty in media policy and media institutions. For Lee (1994, 2000), the media industry in China is bewildered by contradictions and ambiguities. The Chinese media organization has long been considered as a propaganda section of the government, thus can hardly deviate from the dominant ideology of the Party-state. Journalists in China are required to apply the Party policies and guidelines to journalistic practices (Lee, 1994). Therefore, one of China's mass media's obligations

is to promote party lines and policies (Yang, 2003). Opposing the dominant discourse of “news as ideology” in academic analysis of the changes, Chang et al. (1994) code the media transformation from a knowledge perspective and suggest media’s role as the major stock of social knowledge. Based on an extensive analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) of news presented on national media, their study indicates that Chinese news media are the major stock of social knowledge, serving as ways for the general public to make sense of the changing environment.

### 3.2 Development of the internet in China

A brief overview of the internet development in China is given in this section to provide part of the background to the mapping of web journalism in the country. It comprises a review of prominent scholarly discussions on identifying historical periods in the technological development of the internet in China as well as statistical information of Chinese internet users and internet applications. A summary of related statistical reports and surveys is of great help for understanding the developing path of Chinese web journalism. The final part of this section focuses specifically on the introduction of popular mainstream news websites in China, as they are the key research objects of this study.

Drawn from academic work that discusses phases of development of the internet in China, there are generally two approaches to the history of Chinese internet media. One approach claims that the path of China’s internet expansion has much in common with that in the West, because the internet originated from technological innovation and improved by technological progress. This approach suggests the jump from e-mail transmission services to full-scale Internet services in 1994 as a main dividing line (Lu et al., 2002). Qi (2000) shares the similar division by dividing the development into three stages: 1987—1994: using e-mail; 1994—1995: developing research and education networks; and 1995—2000: commercial use. The other approach takes both technological and social influence into account, exemplified in

books of Tai (2006) and Jeffrey (2000). They emphasize the social role in the internet development, holding that the historical phases of the internet are also largely affected by changing governmental tactics. Other than constraining the influence to mere technological attributes, I would prefer the latter approach in delineating the path of the internet development in China. Notably, new technologies and inventions come from within the society (Rogers, 1995; Abrahamson, 1998), thus the improvement and diffusion of novel technologies are affected by the interaction of the political, economic and social dynamics. Then of course, the expansion of new technology, in turn, contributes to the changing society. In light of this logic, I advocate a context-based model to analyze historical stages of the internet development in China.

The history of the technological development of the internet in China has been well documented both in English and Chinese academic work, and will not be presented in detail here. A brief description of major events in the process is nevertheless worth dwelling upon. On 20 September 1987, Professor Qian Tianbai<sup>7</sup> used the Italian Public Network ITAPAC to send out the first electronic mail from China. This event has been generally agreed upon to be the very beginning of China's effort to develop the internet (He and Zhu, 2002; Peng, 2005; Tai, 2006). The content of the first email was 'Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner in the World' and this short message marks "a giant step in China's Internet initiative" (Tai, 2006: 122). This endeavor had incited several institutions, Tsinghua University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences for instance, to experiment on connecting their computer networks to the internet. Then in May 1989, the Chinese Research Network (CRN) connected to the internet successfully through the German Research Network, providing internet services such as email, catalogue and file transmission. In October 1990, Professor Qian Tianbai, on behalf of China, registered the top-level country domain as .CN. It signified that China had established its own internet identity. Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the development of the Chinese internet was suspended, because the Chinese government tightened its control over all

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<sup>7</sup> For all the Chinese name, I chose to put the surname first to reflect the practice of Chinese naming.

communications channels then. During this period of time, in contrast to China's halt on the internet network construction, the West had experienced increasing bandwidth, varied internet applications, and swelling numbers of internet users. More importantly, the World Wide Web (WWW) was created in 1989 at the European Nuclear Research Center in Geneva, Switzerland. This significant technological development paved the way for the dramatic expansion of the use of the internet in later years.

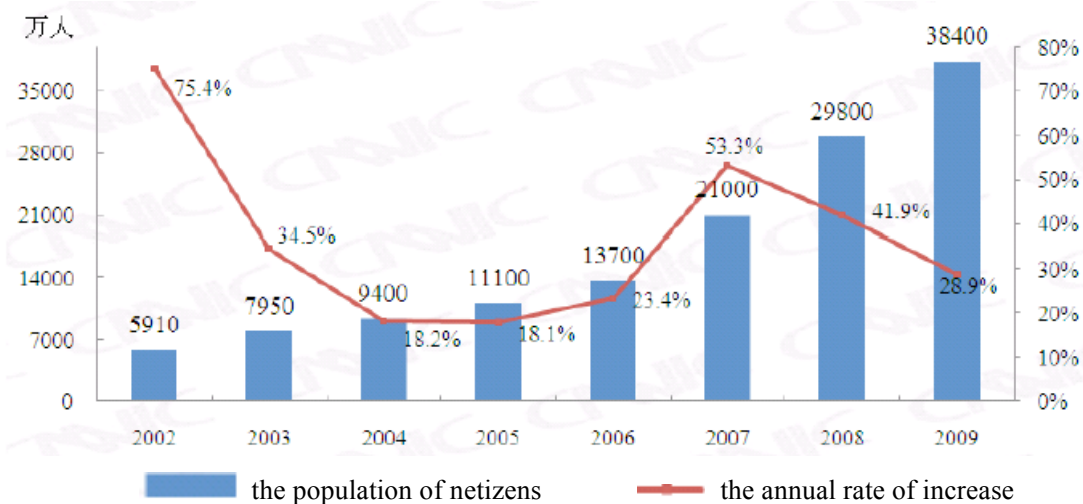
In the face of the widening technological and economic gaps between China and the Western powers, the Chinese government began to make efforts to initiate China's own version of the "information superhighway". In 1993, the Chinese government launched a central project (called the "Golden Bridge Project") to build the national information infrastructure. In 1994, China's internet finally operated in a systematic way through an agreement signed between the Chinese Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPT) and Sprint Co. Ltd of the United States. This was the first-ever direct connection between the Chinese and the global internet. Then in January 1995, the MPT claimed that "access to the internet went commercial", which was considered as a milestone decision. It is one of the state's many reforms to open up China's economy to global capitalism, aiming at accelerating economic growth as well as boosting its international competitiveness. As noted above, in the early stages only a small number of elite people, such as scientists, researchers, and university faculty located in metropolitan centres, could access the internet in China. The situation was dramatically changed when the MPT decided to open the internet-service-provision market. Compared with only 3,000 people who were able to access the internet in 1995, the number of internet users had risen to 200,000 by the end of 1996 (Zhou, 2006: 139).

In 1997, the Chinese Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) published its first statistical report to provide various data on the development of the internet in China. Since 1998, these reports, including information on user demographics, access locations and online behaviour, have been published twice-yearly. There has been an



exponential increase in the number of internet users in the recent decade, as shown in the table below, supplied by the CNNIC reports.

The population of Chinese netizens (in ten thousands) and the annual rate of increase<sup>8</sup>:



The overall number of netizens in China had increased to 384 million as of 31 December 2009, which is the largest in the world. The proportion of netizens with broadband access among Chinese netizens is 90.1 percent, and that is to say, the number of broadband users in China has reached 346 million. The use rate of online news reached 80.1 percent, and the number of users reached 307 million, leaping to the second place in the ranking of uses for the internet, only next to the use rate of online music. In particular, the number of online news users has increased by 73.69 million in a year, with an annual growth rate of 31.5 percent. The rate of consumption of online news among netizens in China, 80.1 percent, is higher than that in the United States (71 percent) and that in South Korea (67.1 percent).

In the development of internet technology, the government's active efforts cannot be overlooked. Much internet-related research in the Chinese context has overwhelmingly focused on the government's censorship and control as well as the expected "liberating role" of the internet (e.g. Chen, 1993; Chu, 1994; Lee, 1994;

<sup>8</sup> Offered by CNNIC report (released in January 2010). Available at: <http://www.cnnic.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2010/1/15/101600.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2010).

Lynch, 1999; Foster and Goodman, 2000; Tsui, 2003); little mention, especially in Western publications, has been made of the fact that the Chinese government has been an active promoter of the internet. With regard to the above statistics, the significant internet development is phenomenal by any standards. Actually, among Chinese academics, a “leapfrogging discourse” has dominated the discussion, emphasizing the economic benefits of internet development (e.g. Dai, 2003). The Chinese authorities have long held firmly that the internet technology could be an engine for economic and technological revolution. The development of the information industry is considered as an important impetus to China’s goal of achieving the “four modernizations” in agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology.

### 3.3 Online news media in China

The above is a brief overview of the technological development of the internet in China. It offers a general background for the study of the internet as a platform for news production and dissemination. The following paragraphs are devoted to a chronological introduction of the online news media, including the rise of Chinese internet media, as well as an elaboration of a few mainstream news websites in China. Instead of being all-inclusive, this introduction aims to portray a small number of key online news media in China. These websites are introduced in detail not only because they launched certain online services first, but also because these online media are still pioneering in today’s online journalistic practice in China. The background information of their early stages of development is helpful in understanding current Chinese news media online.

The launch of Chinese news websites, in a broad sense, can be understood as part of China’s response to globalization trends. In 1995, a weekly magazine—*China Scholars Abroad* (*Shen Zhou Xue Ren*)—became the first online publication in China. Quite a few social and political factors can be explored in terms of why this magazine

had the opportunity to publish online first (Peng, 2005). In 1995, the internet was an absolutely new concept for the majority of Chinese, while this magazine was mainly oriented towards Chinese students and researchers abroad, who were familiar with the internet and who were mostly frequent internet users. Therefore, this group of readers was more likely to be readers of the online publication. It is also a fact that more and more Chinese scholars studying abroad in the 1990s chose to stay abroad permanently in the face of much negative information they received about China. Therefore, the Chinese government wanted to use the internet channel to transmit some of the achievements of modern China so as to strengthen the relationship and to attract those scholars back to make contributions to the homeland. *China Scholars Abroad* was published under the supervision of the Ministry of Education of China and was considered to be suitable to carry the propaganda responsibility. It deserves attention that the online version of *China Scholars Abroad* is not a simple transplant of its off-line print material. The electronic version differs from the paper version in both the content and format. More importantly, from the very beginning, the online version had already offered several means for users to view the information, such as WWW, FTP, Gopher and email subscription. It is generally agreed that the debut of this online magazine signifies the commencement of the internet serving as a news medium in China. Since then, growing numbers of traditional Chinese media have launched their web editions.

In December 1995, *China Daily* launched its website ([www.ihep.ac.cn/chinadaily](http://www.ihep.ac.cn/chinadaily)), making it the first national daily to publish online. Due to the problem of low speed, the website of *China Daily* established a mirror site in 1996 in the United States utilizing its own domain name ([www.chinadaily.com.cn](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn)). Owing to both technological and ideological limitations, the news website in 1995 was presented in a rather plain manner, with very simple interface and format. The content was identical or similar to its paper edition and was not updated in a timely way. The essential purpose of the online version of *China Daily* was to reinforce its influence and thus to increase the newspaper's circulation (Peng, 2005). In August 2000, *China Daily* launched its

English web pages. Published in both Chinese and English, the website then played dual roles—informing foreign viewers of the latest news about China and updating Chinese readers about the world. Serving as an online bridge between China and the rest of the world became its distinctive feature compared to other daily newspapers online. This feature also proved to be a leading advantage for its competitiveness and further development in later days.

In 1995, the book *Being digital* (translated as *Shu Zi Hua Sheng Cun* in Chinese), written by Nicholas Negroponte, happened to be an unexpected catalyzer in the popularity of the internet utilization in China. As mentioned earlier, this book warmly welcomed the digital technology and promised the ultimate triumph of “decentralizing, globalizing, harmonizing, and empowering” as a result of digital power (1995: 229). *Being digital* was translated into some twenty languages and was absolutely a bestseller in the middle of 1990s, despite its obvious utopian approach, as critics pointed out. Negroponte became a household name in China, even though it is a name quite difficult for the Chinese to remember and pronounce. In fact, as to the development of web journalism, Negroponte’s influence in China goes beyond the digital promise that fueled the mushrooming in news websites. China’s first search engine Sohu was successfully launched with its first round of venture capital from Negroponte, as is discussed further later.

Encouraged by a powerful digital optimism and the further development of the internet infrastructure, an increasing number of traditional Chinese media commenced developing their online versions. After 1996, national newspapers, including the *People’s Daily*, *Economic Daily*, *Financial Times*, etc. and regional newspapers such as *Beijing Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*, *Shenzhen Daily*, *Southern Daily* and so on launched their websites. Additionally, the Xinhua news agency, China Central Television (CCTV), various magazines and web portals also made their online debut in the late 1990s. Such a trend mirrors the early development of Western online media, as introduced in the literature review.

The Xinhua News Agency was founded in 1931. It is one of the largest news agencies in the world and one of the most influential news institutions in China.<sup>9</sup> This agency played and still plays an essential role of news reporting both at home and abroad. Serving as a central organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese government, Xinhua News Agency functions “as an official news authority which was, and to a large extent still is, responsible for setting the general tone for other media outlets in the coverage of politically sensitive events” (Xin, 2008: 2). Nevertheless, this news agency is more regularly cited as a credible source in recent decades. Xinhuanet was launched in 1997 as the online news provision of the Xinhua News Agency. It is the primary provider of major news to many news websites and search engines. Interestingly, it has several domain names: xinhuanet.com, xinhua.org and news.cn. Its English version can be found at xinhuanet.com/English/ or at another domain name again, chinaview.cn. Providing news in six languages—Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish and Arabic—is its outstanding characteristic. Due to its significant status in China, Xinhuanet is able to access some exclusive resources. High-ranking Chinese government officials, experts, scholars and authorities from various fields are often invited to Xinhuanet for in-depth interviews.

China Central Television aired its first programme in 1958, under the name of Television China. It was then changed to CCTV in 1978. It is the major state television broadcaster in China, with a network of 18 channels and is accessible to more than one billion viewers. CCTV.com was established and began trial operations in December 1996. As an important part of CCTV, the website CCTV.com has some superiority over other news providers in its high quality audio-visual resources. By 2005, 70 percent of CCTV’s programmes had been web-casted online by live video streaming and video-on-demand programmes. According to the director of CCTV.com, the major functions of this news website are still largely affiliated with CCTV, for

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion on the Xinhua News Agency, please refer Xin, X. (2008) “Structural change and journalism practice: Xinhua News Agency in the early 2000s”, *Journalism Practice*, 2 (1), 46-63.

example, to provide suggestions for television programme planning, to collect feedback from the audience, and to promote interaction between television and the audience (Liu, 2005). Nevertheless, the director acknowledges the importance of originality and expresses the site's efforts in initiating a series of original programmes as well as news channels and entertainment channels targeted at young netizens (Liu, 2005).

The websites of Xinhuanet and CCTV serve as part of the central organ of the government and claim to serve the public simultaneously. Having long been the party mouthpiece and propaganda tool, the two news websites represent the official news authority and have maintained their exclusive status at home whilst expanding their operation gradually abroad. In short, the two official news websites mentioned above represent the mainstream of web journalism in China and thus deserve close examination. In addition to those websites, a few web portals are very popular among China's internet users and are always positioned as the top news websites by online traffic rankings. A portal in science fiction is an entryway to another world, while the web portal is a gateway to "many different worlds"; it is an entrance with search engines or links to useful pages and contents (Jeffery, 2000). The late 1990s witnessed the rise in China of leading commercial portal sites such as Sohu.com, Sina.com, Netease.com, and QQ.com. The four portal sites have played an important role in Chinese mainstream journalism online.

Sohu corporation was founded by Zhang Chaoyang (also known as Charles Zhang) in February 1998. One of China's internet media pioneers, Zhang has a PhD degree in experimental physics from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a Bachelor of Science degree from Tsinghua University in Beijing. Though Zhang's educational background relates little to journalism or business management, the postgraduate experience in MIT offered him the chance to get to know Nicholas Negroponte, the author of *Being digital*, and to witness the success of Yahoo! in the US. With a first round of venture capital from Negroponte, Zhang launched the first

Chinese search engine—Sohu. In order to imitate the successful Yahoo!, Zhang intended to use the name of Sohoo. Unfortunately, Sohoo.com was registered by a Korean company. Therefore, Zhang registered Sohu.com instead as the domain name. It is an interesting name in Chinese language. Pin yin ‘so’ means search, while ‘hu’ means fox which is an ingenious and smart creature in the eyes of the Chinese. Within one year’s time, Sohu.com had developed from a search engine to a comprehensive internet portal with various content channels. As a loyal imitator of the portal website in the US, Zhang had successfully conveyed the American portal model into China. In 2000, Sohu Inc. completed an Initial Public Offering on the Nasdaq Stock Exchange and was ranked among the best small public companies globally by Forbes. In the same year, the acquisition of the leading Chinese online alumni club, Chinaren.com, made Sohu.com more popular among the young generation. In November 2005, Sohu was selected to be the Official Internet Content Service Sponsor of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.

NetEase Inc. was established by Ding Lei (also known as William Ding) in June 1997. Largely due to the low speed, high price and the shortage of Chinese information online, surfing on the internet was not easy for the Chinese at that time. To make the internet easy for Chinese people was the original intention of “NetEase”. During the first two years, this company developed software products to facilitate internet usage. A bilingual (English and Chinese) web-based message distribution system was created by this company in November 1997. This system was adopted by a number of websites to offer email accounts to the public and soon made NetEase notable. At that time, about half of China’s internet users used the free email accounts supported by NetEase’s software. Not until June 1998, did NetEase.com finally turn from being a software website to a web portal. To make the domain name easier to memorize, Ding registered 163.com, which is the first domain name with Arabic numerals in China. 163 was the dial-up number for the Chinese to go online, so internet users at that time were quite familiar with this number. By providing many online services, including news content, personalized home pages, community forums, e-cards, emails, and

games, NetEase gained popularity in a short time and topped the list of users' recommended websites in CNNIC surveys in July 1998 and January 1999. NetEase commenced its Initial Public Offering on the Nasdaq in June 2000.

Sina Corporation was created on 1 December 1998 by merging a software company, Stone Rich Sight Information Technology Company Ltd (SRS, known as Si Fang Li Tong in Chinese), and a US website company SINANET.com (known as Hua Yuan in Chinese). The name Sina was coined by the combination of Sino and China. By re-publishing news from traditional media partners and internet sources, Sina.com is committed to providing a wide array of online news services. Soon after its founding, Sina's timely and comprehensive coverage of the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade established its reputation. Sina.com quickly became popular and overtook Sohu.com as China's number one news website (CNNIC, July 1999). Since then, Sina.com has always been ranked among the most popular Chinese news websites by various surveys, such as surveys from the US web information company Alexa, and China Websites Ranking ([www.chinarank.org.cn](http://www.chinarank.org.cn)). On the "about us" section, Sina.com claims itself as "an online media and entertainment service provider that is committed to serving the online entertainment and infotainment needs of the global Chinese community" ([http://corp.sina.com.cn/eng/sina\\_prod\\_eng.htm](http://corp.sina.com.cn/eng/sina_prod_eng.htm)). As noticed from this statement, Sina.com emphasizes on "infotainment". In fact, this website is well-known for offering feature news stories on entertainment, sports, dramatic events and breaking news. The domestic political news of Sina.com is mainly sourced from the big national media, such as *China Daily*, *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency. The CEO of Sina, Wang Zhidong, issued a clear statement that Sina had no standpoint of its own and Sina.com.cn was only a platform for news stories (Peng, 2005). According to Wang, the main role of Sina is to consolidate and distribute news stories. The strategy of "being a news portal", rather than a news creator has proved to be a successful one for Sina. Despite being launched later than Sohu and Netease, Sina Corporation was the first Chinese web company to be approved for listing on the NASDAQ index in April 2000. In 2000, Sina was selected by the Chinese government



and the Chinese Olympic Committee as the official web site for online coverage of the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney.

Tencent Corporation, widely known as QQ, was founded in Shenzhen, China in November 1998. This company offers China's most popular IMS (instant messaging service) platform called "OICQ", which was formally launched in February 1999. Based on the already existing IMS program "ICQ" in the West, "OICQ" was almost the same software but in a Chinese version. Due to the issue of trademark infringement proceedings, "OICQ" was changed to "QQ" in 2001. Since its entrance into Chinese households, QQ has quickly gained vast popularity and emerged as a modern cultural phenomenon and has been portrayed as a kind of popular culture. According to Tencent's financial reports<sup>10</sup>, there were 341.9 million active QQ accounts as of the end of June 2008. This is 50 percent more than the number of Internet users in China and is the size of the US population. Admittedly, it is possible that some users own two or more QQ accounts, but the dramatic statistics at least testify to its huge popularity in China. In June, 2006, Tencent QQ's peak simultaneous online users broke 20 million. Many agree that in China, QQ is not just a way to communicate, it is a phenomenon, a part of culture, and a daily necessity for internet users. Based on its well-known real time communication service, Tencent established its portal site QQ.com in 2003. In only three months, QQ.com ranked within the top 10 Chinese web portals and in three years, QQ.com surpassed Sina and Sohu in online traffic, according to Alexa's ranking. With its high penetration into Chinese internet users, the mini news page of QQ (usually a pop-up when logging into the IMS QQ) has attracted numerous clicks. Therefore, the QQ portal is known as a "desktop portal". Compared with Sina and Sohu, the distinctive feature of QQ.com is its unique means of communication based on its IMS community.

It needs to be clarified that the four portal sites have played a slightly different role in

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<sup>10</sup> Available at: <http://www.tencent.com/en-us/content/ir/rp/2008/attachments/200802.pdf> (accessed 3 January 2009).

the field of online news. Instead of producing news on their own, the web portals are more likely to be involved in news dissemination, as mentioned above. Portals collect and consolidate news from various sources and distribute news stories at their own sites. The economic concern is certainly a contributing factor, since it is cheaper and more practical to purchase the news from traditional media (e.g. via annual contract) than to cover a wide range of news by themselves. One more reason relevant here is the restriction of journalistic registration in China. For a number of news events, especially politically sensitive issues, these commercial sites would be granted neither journalistic reporting rights (or licence) nor interviewing qualifications to cover those events. Therefore, the most common types of web-generated content at the four portal sites are sports and entertainment news.

The research objects in this thesis are mainstream news websites that have successfully gained large popularity. Hence, particular attention here is devoted to the following news websites: Xinhua News Agency's online counterpart ([www.xinhuanet.com](http://www.xinhuanet.com)), China Central Television's news website ([www.cctv.com](http://www.cctv.com)), and four web portals: Sohu ([www.sohu.com](http://www.sohu.com)), Netease ([www.163.com](http://www.163.com)), Sina ([www.sina.com.cn](http://www.sina.com.cn)) and Tencent ([www.qq.com](http://www.qq.com)). Based on the introduction to Chinese mainstream news websites above, one might notice the intensely competitive atmosphere of the Chinese internet media industry. In fact, a prominent difference between Chinese and Anglo-American mainstream journalism online lies on the level of media organizations. In many Western countries, for quite a long time, popular and authoritative news websites are those operated by traditional big newspapers or those affiliated with national television or radio stations. The *New York Times* (nytimes.com), NBC (msnbc.com), the *Guardian* (guardian.co.uk), the BBC (bbc.com), the *New Zealand Herald* (nzherald.co.nz) and TVNZ (tvnz.co.nz) are a few prominent examples. The reason behind such a phenomenon is closely related to the brand identity and social position. Those news organizations have long been recognized and accepted by a large number of audiences worldwide, thus it is effortless for them to advertise their news websites to more audiences. Moreover,

these giant news corporations, without doubt, have the advantage of resources to better equip their online counterparts and in this way, large audiences are guided to either or, in most cases, both the traditional and online news outlets of the corporation.

However, it is a different story in China. The online counterparts of big national press or television stations in China are not as popular as Chinese portal sites. More precisely, instead of those traditional media organizations, the four web portals discussed above are in the first decade of the twenty-first century the main field of web journalism in China. As elaborated above, except for the website of Sina, none of the other three portal sites were originally orientated towards news provision. Thus it is interesting to discuss reasons behind the decline of traditional media's online counterparts and the popularity and leadership of portal sites as news destinations in China. As mentioned previously, the big national press and broadcasting media in China have been censored and are considered as part of the "ideological apparatuses" of the state. Chinese readers share the knowledge that big national papers are dull and the front page (full of politics) is boring (Pan, 1996). In this way, the national media's online news sites find it hard to establish an identity beyond their propaganda reputation and indeed they are struggling in the more free market environment of the internet, where there is more competition, innovation and less propaganda. Compared with the traditional media, Chinese commercial news portals are more active in innovations that facilitate news consumption and communication. Moreover, in addition to news and information, the four web-only organizations provide a wide variety of online services to attract users' repeat visits to their sites, such as searching, mails, games, personal virtual spaces, and so on. The portal sites actually have gained the upper hand in building and advertising their brand identity through their relatively strong market force. Therefore, this study will include both portal sites and traditional media's online counterparts as research objects in China. It is my contention that choosing the online newspapers as the main researching site in studies of Chinese mainstream web journalism is both theoretically unconvincing and historically problematic. This approach fails to acknowledge the differences between Chinese and

Western media structures. Again, it is the problem of neglecting the unique context of the Chinese media environment.

### 3.4 Case study introduction

A brief introduction to the two news events is presented here to convey a preliminary idea of the cases under study. The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games is the first ever Olympic Games to have full digital coverage freely available around the world, with hundreds of millions of viewers able to follow the action on an extensive range of digital media platforms. It is noted that the Olympic Games, as one of the world's biggest media events, have struggled to adapt to an increasingly online world. Until 2007, the web had remained a largely unexplored medium for the Olympics (Ye and Fowler, 2007). Television broadcasting has been the biggest stumbling block since the IOC makes most of its money by selling rights to television broadcasters. As of the 2000 Olympic Games, all video and audio transmissions of the Games were banned from the web. During the 2004 Athens Games, there were only eight territories that experimented with delayed web coverage. Not until the 2006 Winter Games in Turin, did a few media (e.g. NBC, BBC) begin to stream one or two live events on the internet. It is a fact that many people historically visit the website only to find out what is going to be on television and when. Others would be looking more for highlights than full streams. Therefore, memorable moments are served online to meet the needs of casual Olympic fans. The 2008 Olympic Games, however, would mark a milestone for the digital media to find their preeminent position at one of the world's most popular broadcast events (CNN, 9 July 2008). For the first time, a large amount of live and on-demand video was available to domestic sports fans via the internet. In the US, NBCOlympics.com offered its largest Olympic broadcast in history with a total of 3,600 hours of coverage being streamed (IOC, 2008: 30). Approximately 2,200 hours of live video across 25 sports were available, which was "more live coverage from a single Olympics than the total of all previous Summer Olympics combined", said Dick Ebersol, chairman of NBC Universal Sports and Olympics and

executive producer of NBCU's Olympic coverage (NBCOlympics.com, 9 July 2008). In the UK, the huge online demand saw the BBC deliver 50 million video streams, compared to just 2.4 million during Athens 2004, and as many as 45 percent of the BBC's Olympic audience engaged with video from its Olympic site (IOC, 2008: 33). TVNZ.co.nz of New Zealand offered four channels of simultaneous video streaming online from TV ONE, TVNZ Sport Extra and two additional channels programmed by ONE Sport, which were only available online. In total, over 800 hours of Olympic actions were available online to viewers in New Zealand (Throng, 20 June 2008). In China, CNNIC collaborating with Wrating Data released the Research Report on the Broadcasting Effect of the 2008 Olympic Network Media. The Report (September, 2008) reveals that 3,800 hours of live streaming and 4,000 hours of on-demand video were available among nine Chinese websites that gained the rights to broadcast the 2008 Olympics. During the Olympics, in China alone, 153 million viewers had watched live broadcasts of the Games online and 237 million people had watched the on-demand video (IOC, 2008: 31). In a word, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games has made digital broadcasting history.

Being home to some 384 million internet users, China had witnessed dramatically intense competition in the Chinese internet market. Since the IOC bundled internet and mobile broadcasts with television rights, NBC of the US, BBC of the UK, TVNZ of New Zealand and CCTV of China gained the broadcasting rights. In contrast to the sole online video provider of the 2008 Games in the three Western countries, there were nine websites<sup>11</sup> in China offering Olympic video coverage. As the Official Internet Sponsor<sup>12</sup> of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the web portal Sohu was first granted the rights to webcast the 2008 Games. It obtained all the video content that CCTV had, including 3,800 hours of worldwide broadcast Olympic Games video and

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<sup>11</sup> The nine websites that purchased the rights to broadcast the 2008 Olympic Games were: the internet affiliate of CCTV, four web portals (Sohu, Sina, QQ and NetEase), a video sharing website (Ku6) and P2P video streaming websites (Uusee, PPstream and PPlive).

<sup>12</sup> In 2005, Chinese web company Sohu Inc. outbid severe competition to become the exclusive internet sponsor of the Beijing Olympic Games. For an estimated \$30 million, Sohu bought the rights to create the official website for the Beijing Olympic Committee and to use the Beijing Games logo of a runner in the company's marketing.

1,200 hours of CCTV's own video. Sina.com, Netease.com and QQ.com signed an agreement with CCTV.com for the rights of webcasting the 2008 Games in July 2008, one month later than Sohu.com got its video rights. The three websites respectively obtained 3,800 hours of worldwide broadcast Olympic Games video, including opening and closing ceremonies as well as athletic competitions. In response to Sohu's claim of certain exclusive rights at the 2008 Olympics, online rivals, including Sina, QQ, and Netease formed an Olympic Coverage Alliance to against Sohu. In addition to web-based media, this alliance comprised television stations, radio stations and print media as well. Interestingly, Sohu also formed a similar alliance within a short time, featuring a media team that incorporated both traditional media and web-based media in China.

The Olympic Coverage Alliance pioneered by Sina, QQ and NetEase:

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The Olympic Coverage Alliance pioneered by Sohu:

战略合作电视台（排名不分先后）														
央视国际	北京	上海文广	湖南	安徽	江西	重庆	江苏	天津	四川	浙江	河南	山东	辽宁	广西
云南	黑龙江	深圳	贵州	湖北	福建	内蒙古	旅游	陕西	青海	宁夏	甘肃	西藏	厦门	中国教育
齐鲁	沈阳	西安	南京	长沙	杭州	大连	青岛	苏州	无锡	常州	连云港	三亚		
奥运媒体联盟														
半岛都市报	重庆时报	大河报	海峡都市报	华商报	华商晨报	华西都市报	今日早报							
晶报	南京晨报	青年报	武汉晨报	潇湘晨报	新文化报	现代金报	燕赵都市报							
安徽商报	新商报	都市时报	贵州都市报	华兴时报	江南都市报	兰州晨报	三晋都市报							
生活报	生活日报	西藏商报	西海都市报	都市消费晨报	城市快报	南国早报	羊城晚报							
京华时报	北方新报	南国都市报												
奥运战略合作媒体														
中国日报	北京日报报业集团	南方报业传媒集团	瞭望周刊社	文汇新民报业集团	北京晨报	精品购物指南	体育画报	体育新报						
奥运合作网站														
新华网	人民网	北方网	长城在线	大河网	大连天健网	大众网	东北网							
东北新闻网	广西新闻网	杭州网	红网	华龙网	黄河新闻网	金黔在线	荆楚网							
每日甘肃网	内蒙古新闻网	南海网	青岛新闻网	青海新闻网	四川新闻网	天山网	陕西新闻网							
厦门网	云网	浙江在线	中安在线	中国吉林网	中国江苏网	中国江西网	中国西藏新闻网							
山东百灵网	大江网	中国新闻网												

Commentators described the fierce competition among Chinese web media in the coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games as “An Olympian web war in China” (Ye and Fowler, 2007) and “Dot-coms begin the battle for real gold” (China.cn, 17 July 2007). The highly competitive atmosphere was likely to give rise to a distinctive online landscape for the Olympic coverage.

As well as the breakthrough in online broadcasting, the 2008 Olympic Games witnessed a (probably temporary) loosening of restrictions on the journalistic registration to the portal sites in China. As mentioned above, web portals in China had little advantage in news reporting, as they were historically granted neither journalistic reporting rights nor interviewing licences. News stories at web portals in China were largely shovelware from traditional media. Not until the 2006 Winter Olympics, had Sina been granted internet media’s first interviewing licence for the Olympics. Significant changes took place in 2008. During the Beijing Olympics, leading Chinese portals played an important role in news coverage. Staff at web portals gained entrance passes and journalistic licences to work on site. As the exclusive internet content services sponsor, Sohu assembled a 700-member Olympic news team, which included 100 Olympics-accredited reporters and another 300

photographers, cameramen and technicians who worked on the competition venues. The 2008 Olympics appears to be a turning point in terms of the online journalistic registration. It was expected that there would be much web-generated content found in the portal sites.

The second news event included in the case study is the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009. This pandemic, also known as swine flu, had its first outbreak in Mexico in April 2009 and since then spread to countries worldwide. It was officially the first flu pandemic for 40 years. By the end of July 2009, hundreds of people died and tens of thousands of people were affected world wide. The time frame for this study covered the climax of this event, which was from 11 June 2009 to 16 July 2009. As of June 11, nearly 30,000 confirmed cases had been reported in 74 countries and the WHO declared the outbreak of the swine flu a global pandemic on that day (WHO, 11 June 2009). As swine flu cases grew steeply, WHO announced on 16 July 2009 that it had decided to stop tracking swine flu cases around the world, since it had become extremely difficult for countries to try to confirm every case through laboratory testing. Across the 36 days, news websites had numerous updates concerning the pandemic.

To summarize, by including the introduction to the overall media system, the internet profile, the historical background of Chinese mainstream news websites, and the cases under study, this chapter assists in placing Chinese web journalism within broader contexts, and helps with the following analysis on the distinctiveness of Chinese web journalism as well as the investigation of the wider implications of the results.



## 4. Theory and Method

This chapter focuses on the methodology and specific research design for the study. Several different but closely related methods, namely, genre analysis, comparative analysis and case studies of news events, are employed to explore the distinctive characteristics of web journalism in China. Genre theory, especially a framework for analyzing digital genres, is applied in this thesis to analyze news production and dissemination on the web. Using this theory, the primary concern of the research becomes a matter of characterizing typical characteristics of mainstream web news genres within different contexts. Genre theory is particularly useful in identifying contextual meanings of genres and positioning them within circumstances. How the mainstream web news genre defines, organizes and finally communicates with various social realities lies at the heart of the project. Through comparative analysis between Chinese and Anglo-American web news genres, this thesis attempts to explore the distinctiveness of Chinese web journalism. My chosen Anglo-American countries, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, are alike in terms of social and media systems, whereas China is expected to be significantly different. This difference is a strength for the comparative design of the thesis, what Przeworski and Teune (1970) term the study of “most different systems” as a strategy for identifying distinctive features of each of the systems. Then case studies of news events are employed to study the media in a natural setting and to understand the nature and complexity of the processes taking place (Benbasat et al., 1987). By focusing on in-depth news sections for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, this study closely examines distinctive online journalistic practices and productions within the Anglo-American and Chinese contexts. The following paragraphs are devoted to clarifying each research method employed in this study, as well as detailed research steps and a list of mainstream news websites under analysis.

## 4.1 Genre analysis

Genre analysis is a theoretical lens that I find particularly useful for linking web news features with particular social and cultural contexts. This section begins with an overview of the genre theoretical framework in general and then moves to a review of scholarship specifically on digital genre theory. Particular attention has been devoted to digital genre features and to social-cultural constructs.

### 4.1.1 General theoretical framework

The term genre originates from the Latin word *genus* and dates back to classical philosophy in the field of categorization. Now it is widely used as a classifying statement, especially in the field of arts, literature and media. A genre is basically a class of “an artistic endeavour” or “a distinctive category of literary composition”, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica 2009.<sup>13</sup> The theoretical framework of genre has been widely used within the area of discourse analysis of textual components. There is a substantial body of literature written by linguistic experts and authorities with concern to the genre theory. Martin’s (1985) *Factual writing: Exploring and challenging social reality*, Swales’ (1990) *Genre analysis: English in academic settings* and Bhatia’s (1993) *Analysing genre: Language use in professional settings* are significant works within this area. Martin’s and Swales’ definitions both place genre at the centre of communication as social action:

A genre is a staged, goal oriented, purposeful activity, in which speakers engage as members of our culture ... Virtually everything you do involves you participating in one or other genre. Culture seen in these terms can be defined as a set of generically interpretable activities.

(Martin, 1985: 25)

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent

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<sup>13</sup> Available at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1353736/genre> (accessed 19 November 2007).

discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style.

(Swales 1990: 58)

Drawing on Swales' (1990) work, Bhatia emphasizes the features and conventions which characterize genres:

Genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognized purpose(s).

(Bhatia, 1993: 13)

Drawn from the linguistic research field, the three definitions show some differences in how linguistic theorists define the term genre. Martin's theory heavily focuses on the cultural constructs and discards the principles of shared purposes and similarities of content, form and style. In contrast, Swales and Bhatia are likely to exclude classifying less highly structured forms of communicative activity as genres. Swales characterizes a genre as "a class of communicative events" having a shared "set of communicative purposes" and similar structures, stylistic features, content and intended audiences. A specific genre is usually named and recognized by members of the culture in which it is found. Though taking after Swales, Bhatia's theory, which focuses on discourse within the academic community, underlines the importance of genre characteristics, conventions and constraints that are recognized and understood by its professional members. It seems that some reconciliation and further extension of these three points of view are required.

For this thesis, genre is not simply a description of how texts work; rather, it is a helpful tool to analyze texts. The important role of genre theory in this study can be briefly identified in the following aspects. Firstly, as evident from the definitions above, genre is less about the text itself and more about uses of languages/forms. More precisely, the genre framework is not just about the set of textual details; it is about what the text is used to achieve in terms of people's goals and values. Moreover, a genre is socially agreed and thus carries its particular assumptions within a culture that we can then track down. For example, once we have identified the characteristics of the genre, we would know a lot about the communication practice in general.

With regard to the theory above, it is evident that genre is a particularly useful theoretical lens for an integrated view of the features of web-based news and their evolution. The broad context of this overview is genre as a framework for the creation and distribution of news on the web, since genre creates shared expectations about contents, forms, purposes, functionalities and the overall communication. A specific genre is usually named and recognized by members of the culture in which it is found. Thus, genre analysis is an important means to find a common vocabulary in doing research across cultures. It is equipped with the power to integrate various contextual factors in a networked context, which is of great importance in a study of web journalism around the globe. From the point of view of applying the theory, the genre theoretical framework is applied in this thesis to analyze news production and dissemination on the web. In these terms, the primary concern of this study emerges as the task of characterizing typical characteristics of the given genre—web news. The genre framework helps to find a way to define web news features within different cultures and thus to seek for differences as well as similarities of web news across countries. Moreover, genre analysis in this thesis underlines a particular concern with the social-cultural contexts, as detailed in the literature review. This study aims to identify the contextual meanings of genres and position them within social-cultural circumstances. The study seeks to describe how the mainstream web news genre defines, organizes and finally communicates with various social realities.

#### 4.1.2 Digital genre analysis

The increasing digitization of information communication and the development of the internet in the 1990s have triggered an extension of academic genre studies to digital genres. Genre analysis in the field of information communication was pioneered by Yates and Orlikowski (1992) in their analysis of organizational uses of email. They introduced genre theory to information system research in the early nineties, and have proven its value as a useful analytical tool in the research of information systems (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski and Yates, 1994). A genre is characterized by having similarities in substance (or content) and form, according to Yates and Orlikowski (1992). Substance refers to themes and topics, while form refers to observable physical and linguistic traits, such as structural attributes, language system, and communication medium (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). A genre's pattern can be identified by an array of visual cues in the layout, such as columns and typefaces (Toms and Campbell, 1999) and has evolved through decades of practice with fonts, colouring and layout of pictures (Schmid-Isler, 2000). Besides substance and form, other traits have also been taken into account in genre analysis. Shepherd and Watters (1998) propose that while non-digital genres can be explored through the twin dimensions of content and form, digital genres are characterized by a triplet of content, form and functionality. Functionality, as Shepherd and Watters (1998) indicate, refers to the capabilities of the digital media. This attribute is analyzed with reference to the purpose of the genre (Shepherd and Watters, 1999). A number of scholars (e.g. Swales, 1990; Orlikowski and Yates, 1994; Crowston and Williams, 1997; Eriksen and Ihlström, 2000) propose to consider the aspect of purpose when exploring a given genre. People establish "a genre repertoire, knowledge of a set of different recurring communicative situations that serves specific purposes" (Eriksen and Ihlström, 2000). In addition, Crowston and Williams (1997) were among the first to apply genre theory to analysis of communication on the web. They argue that classifying different websites as genres could be very useful for web designers to refine their design to reflect resemblance within the genre. Based on the distinction of purpose, instead of

on physical form, they identified 48 different genres from their randomly selected sample of 1000 web pages. At that time, newsletter and news wire articles were the only two news genres in Crowston and Williams' web genre classification.

Content, form, purpose and functionality are widely regarded in the genre literature as key genre characteristics. Various scholars may adopt different combinations of content, form, purpose and functionality to conduct their research.<sup>14</sup> Ihlström (2004) sees all four genre characteristics as fundamental and adds one more characteristic of “positioning” for analysis of online newspapers. In her PhD research, Ihlström (2004: 21, 38) applies the concept of genre to describe news dissemination on the web and defines genre characteristics as follows:

Content refers to the substance (cf. Yates & Orlikowski, 1992) available at the online newspaper, e.g. articles, news streams, video items etc.

Form refers to observable features (cf. Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), i.e. the presentation format of the content, e.g. as a textbox, a button or an icon.

Functionality refers to capabilities available through the new media (Shepherd & Watters, 1998), e.g. searching, interactivity etc.

Purpose is viewed from the perspective of the publisher (cf. Shepherd & Watters, 1999), e.g. a) the communicative purpose to provide the audience with accurate and timely news updates or b) the design purpose to give overview and enable navigation.

Positioning refers to the different position for news of different degrees of values (Ihlström, 2004), e.g. the top position for highest valued news.

Ihlström (2004: 21, 38)

Ihlström's (2004) approach has summarized much of the previous scholarly work and provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for digital genre analysis. By

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed summary of various sets of genre features that utilized by various scholars, see Ihlström's (2004: 17) chart and description.

cultivating the “genre awareness”<sup>15</sup> via the genre characteristics, users and web designers would easily “categorize and recognize sites as belonging to distinctive genres”; the genre characteristics can be “copied and refined to reflect resemblance to an existing genre” when constructing a new website that serves a purpose similar to existing sites (Eriksen and Ihlström, 2000). The application of this model in terms of specific genre analysis is not direct in this thesis. I consider Ihlström’s summary account as a useful analytic in general terms, rather than as specific features of genres. In addition, a good many overlaps between the four aspects need to be acknowledged. For example, the *content* item “video items” can be shown in various *forms* (e.g. links, icons, or images) and requires the *functionality* of media player to present the content. Researchers should be aware of these overlaps and make good use of their interrelations when describing genre features. Moreover, it may be necessary to add more or delete some of the above aspects when dealing with a specific case.

To analyze the complicated digital genres of today, researchers have come up with various approaches. Shepherd and Watters (1998) coined the term “cybergenre” to indicate digital genres and divided them into two classes of subgenres: extant and novel. The extant subgenre is based on a genre already existing in other media that has been cast in a digital form. According to Watters and Shepherd’s illustration, when an existing genre initially transfers to the digital environment, it would be faithfully “replicated” with the original content and form, such as digitized documents. The “extant” model is similar to Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) remediation paradigm that portrays the trend of “new” media remediating or refashioning prior media forms. Then the “variant” may be added at a later phase in the evolution of a digital practice. Multimedia and interactive features are such variants as electronic news evolves. The novel genre is completely dependent on the digital media. It may originate from the extant genre through replication and variants (e.g. news provided by agents but with personalized interfaces), or may not have any counterpart in other media (e.g.

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<sup>15</sup> Genre awareness is an explanation of how users and designers create and maintain web site awareness beyond the individual site, according to Eriksen and Ihlström (2000).

personalized news generated by personal agents). The advantage of Shepherd and Watters' division lies largely in its recognition of the distinctive features of the digital media, although it is short of detailed clarification.

Besides the feature-based advantage, one more noteworthy merit of the genre approach lies in its power to integrate various contextual factors in a networked context. As long as we retain the arena of communication as a dynamic process, we must recognize that the performance of the digital genre is an ongoing process of negotiation in the socio-cultural contexts as well as in the relevant area of specialization. A specific genre comprises an array of genre rules that are described as social rules by Yates and Orlikowski (1992). Genre rules "associate appropriate elements of form and substance with certain recurrent situations" (1992: 302) and "may operate tacitly, through socialized or habitual use of the communicative form and substance, or they may be codified by an individual or body into specific standards designed to regulate the form and substance of communication" (1992: 303). This is in line with Berkenkotter and Huckin's (1995) social constructionist theory of genre knowledge. They claim that genre conventions belong to a certain discourse community, but genres are dynamic forms that can be created and re-created via use within a community. For Berkenkotter and Huckin, genre knowledge includes both form and content; it is shaped by its norms, ideology, epistemology and social ontology. In other words, genres are modified both deliberately and adaptively in response to changing situations over time. By summarizing the theories of Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) together with Yates and Orlikowski (1992) and Orlikowski and Yates (1994, 1998), Ihlström observes that "genre by definition is situated"; it represents "a recurring communicative act" that "occurs in specific situations, locations and among the members of the owning community" (2004: 16). In terms of genre alteration, Ihlström tends to agree with the above points of view and confirms that "the potential of genre modification is inherent in every act of communication" (2004: 16). The modifying process of the communication act can be triggered by "material or perceptual changes" (Ihlström, 2004: 16), such as political,



social, economic and technological circumstances, organizational reactions and changes in elements of form (Yates and Orlikowsk, 1992), as well as the emergence of a new communication medium (Yates et al., 1997). It is clear that subjects cannot be simply categorized on the basis of formal criteria without concern for their contexts. Besides general contextual factors, Orlikowski and Yates (1994) coin the term “genre interdependence” to depict the interrelationship of various genres that may associate with each other. The performance of genres can involve one genre giving way to, or interrupting, or blending with another genre (Schirato and Yell, 2000). Literature on both the contextual factors and the interdependence of genres is of significant importance to this study focusing on web news features within different contexts.

In the course of reviewing genre theory, however, a few limitations of previous research deserve attention. First of all, much of the literature and many of the empirical studies that are mostly closely related to this study’s concerns are restricted to Scandinavian (more often Swedish) online newspapers and are discussed repeatedly by only a few productive scholars (e.g. Eriksen and Ihlström, 2000; Lundberg, 2001; Ihlström and Åkesson, 2004; Ihlström and Lundberg, 2004). There is hardly any academic contribution concerning the genre development of online newspapers from countries other than Scandinavia. Secondly, much attention has been paid to the “online newspapers”, which are defined by Ihlström and Åkesson (2004) as the online editions of local and national daily press. Researchers tend to highlight the differences between print and digital newspapers, rather than treat the online news as a unique genre and articulate its unique features. More precisely, web news is restricted to the newspaper’s online counterpart; other popular online news forms, such as television’s online counterpart and web portals’ news pages, have been generally neglected when it comes to genre analysis. In addition, many researchers (e.g. Schmid-Isler, 2000; Lundberg, 2001; Ihlström and Åkesson, 2004) have focused solely on the front page of online newspapers to come up with a list of genre characteristics specific for online newspapers. This dominant approach seems to be somewhat superficial nowadays and unable to discover the varied set of genres that

come together in different parts of different sites. The call for moving towards other news pages, not only the front page of online news is apparent (Watters et al., 2000). More importantly, there is a gap of literature concentrating on bridging the genre analysis of web news with a traditional mass media theory (e.g. McQuail, 2000).

As to my study, the object is mainstream web news, which consists of mainstream news websites providing a selection of editorial news content. By “mainstream”, I emphasize the news material created by journalistic professionals who work for mainstream driven news organizations that have sizeable audience bases. For Ihlström and Åkesson (2004), the integration of the web medium and the traditional newspaper genre constitutes a specific digital genre of “online newspapers”. In consisting of multimedia content, interactivity, immediacy and other digital media characteristics, the online newspaper genre differs from other digital genres on the web such as personal home pages and e-commerce websites (Ihlström and Åkesson, 2004). Some would also add that internet users can easily tell the differences between online newspapers and other digital genres by their different purposes. The mainstream web news genre discussed here tends to comprise Ihlström and Åkesson’s (2004) digital newspapers genre (e.g. [newyorktimes.com](http://newyorktimes.com),) and television’s online news counterpart (e.g. [news.bbc.co.uk](http://news.bbc.co.uk)) as well as popular web-only news websites (e.g. [news.yahoo.com](http://news.yahoo.com)). I acknowledge the trend that blogs, forums and other emerging forms of online news communication have significantly influenced mainstream news content both on and offline recently, but I would argue this genre of amateur or grassroots journalism has the potential to move towards mainstream, rather than be mainstream already. Instead of taking the prevailing approach of front page analysis, I propose to analyze a very representative section of the mainstream web news—the in-depth (or so called special topic) sections for news events at mainstream news websites. I argue that in-depth sections for specific news events give insight into the fundamentals of journalistic practice and production, and are typical and exemplary of the mainstream web news genre. This point will be further discussed later in this chapter. In this research, Ihlström’s (2004) summary of content, form, functionality,

purpose and positioning offered helpful analytical aspects in defining characteristics of different web news genres. A synchronic approach is employed to examine characteristics that constitute the mainstream web news genre in respective cultures.

Studying a genre opens up an enormous amount of material, even when narrowed down to case studies at particular sites, as I have detailed earlier. In analyzing the genre, I have taken a role of “guerilla viewer” (building upon ethnographers’ terminology), to investigate the journalistic genre on the internet. I maintain such a flexible and open-minded strategy enables researchers to capture the essential nature of cyberspace: fluidity, openness and connections. The following are some of the means by which I have collected the data that construct the research material.

–Enter news websites with a mind free of any preconceptions or prior knowledge.

–Get engaged but be ready to click around in the networks.

–Explore links, take abundant snapshots and notes, and save useful information.

–If necessary and appropriate, post questions and solicit answers online.

–Browse the selected websites as often as possible to make further observations.

–Approach the sites with a comparative logic—looking for intra and inter-system differences.

–Supplement the data with relevant empirical research, reports or surveys.

#### 4.2 Comparative analysis

In this research, comparative analysis between Chinese and Anglo-American mainstream websites has been employed to explore distinctive features of Chinese

web journalism. I maintain that examining web journalism genre in various contexts offers a promising perspective for understanding the diversity of digital media performance globally. Comparisons and contrasts may present revealing evidence and consequently have greater empirical potential that might be restricted or missing when investigating the digital genre within only one country. In their article, “Comparative Analysis in the Social Sciences”, Warwick and Osherson define the “comparative method” as “social scientific analyses involving observations in more than one social system, or in the same social system at more than one point in time” (1973: 8). Comparative analysis plays two basic functions in social theory, according to Hallin and Mancini (2004), concept formation and clarification as well as causal inference. As an important research method, comparative analysis sensitizes us to both variations and similarities and “this can contribute powerfully to concept formation and to the refinement of our conceptual apparatus” (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 2). With regard to present literature on media research, Hallin and Mancini contribute the following:

Most of the literature on the media is highly ethnocentric, in the sense that it refers only to the experience of a single country, yet is written in general terms, as though the model that prevailed in that country were universal. This, at least, is true in the countries with the most-developed media scholarship, including the United States, Britain, France, and Germany. In countries with less developed traditions of media research, another pattern often emerges: a tendency to borrow the literature of other countries – usually the Anglo-American or the French literature – and to treat the borrowed literature as though it could be applied unproblematically anywhere.

(Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 2)

I agree with Hallin and Mancini’s view that the media paradigms that prevail in Western Europe and North America tend to be dominant around the globe. Media systems in less developed countries have been largely neglected. Moreover, certain aspects of a particular media system “may be taken for granted and difficult to detect

when the focus is on only one national case” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1975: 76). In that sense, a comparative analysis between various media systems would be crucial to “render the invisible visible” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1975: 76). Excepting Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) work *Comparing media systems—Three models of media and politics*, comparative studies of media variation and variability around the world are few and far between (Thomson et al., 2008). Concerning the value of comparative analysis as well as the dearth of such a kind of research, this thesis is an attempt to contribute to a broad understanding of the actual diversity of world media systems.

In *The logic of comparative social inquiry*, Przeworski and Teune (1970) divide comparative studies into the “most similar systems” design and the “most different systems” design. Both strategies are built on expectations about social reality. Both can be used to confirm theoretical statements and can combine intrasystemic and intersystemic levels of analysis. I find the two approaches of comparative studies are quite valuable to this research. The “most similar systems” design is considered as a predominant strategy by social scientists. The rationale for this design is “systems as similar as possible with respect to as many features as possible constitute the optimal samples for comparative inquiry” (Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 32). In contrast, the “most different systems” design takes the known differences among social systems as the point of departure and examines the impact of these differences on some other social phenomena investigated within systems. As Przeworski and Teune explain:

The most similar systems design is based on a belief that a number of theoretically significant differences will be found among similar systems and that these differences can be used in explanation. The alternative design, which seeks maximal heterogeneity in the sample of systems, is based on a belief that in spite of intersystemic differentiation, the populations will differ with regard to only a limited number of variables or relationships.

(Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 32)

Both strategies are embodied in the structure of this research project, while a

particular emphasis is given to the “most different systems” design due to the nature of this study. My chosen Anglo-American countries, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, are alike in terms of social and media systems, whereas the case of China is expected to be significantly different from the Anglo-American cases.

#### 4.3 Case studies of news events

The central approach of this research is the case study method. This method is acknowledged by a number of scholars (e.g. Dayan and Katz, 1992; Tellis, 1997; Yin, 1994, 2003) as a highly useful form of social science inquiry. Yin (1994) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its context. It is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Feagin et al., 1991). It enables researchers to study the media in a natural setting and to understand the nature and complexity of the processes taking place (Benbasat et al., 1987). The case study strategy also equips the researcher with the ability to deal with a wide spectrum of evidence. In the introduction to *Applications of case study research*, Yin states that the case study method “is appropriate when investigators either desire or are forced by circumstances (a) to define research topics broadly and not narrowly, (b) to cover contextual or complex multivariate conditions and not just isolated variables, and (c) to rely on multiple and not singular sources of evidence” (2003: xi). The case study methodology satisfies the three tenets of the qualitative method: describing, understanding, and explaining (Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995). The kernel of case studies, according to Hamel et al., lies in establishing “relationships and forces that link the parts in the form of the whole” (1993: 39).

Moreover, the discussion on divisions of case study method—single-case and multiple-case design—is of value to this study. Though both single- and multiple-case approaches are grounded in the same methodological theory, researchers are reminded in the methodological literature to be aware of the specific aim of each approach (Yin,

1994). The single-case method is typically employed to investigate a unique, extreme, rare, critical or revelatory case and it is most likely to be used to confirm or challenge a given theory, while the multiple-case method uses multiple instances to strengthen results by replicating pattern matching among the cases selected for investigation and “is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as more robust” (Yin, 1994: 45). Within this research, I choose to employ the multiple-case study method, involving two cases to be examined.

Furthermore, owing to the complex and ever-changing characteristics of information communication systems, I argue that the case study method is a viable research strategy for digital media investigation. As noted, the field of ICTs is characterized by constant changes and innovations. In the face of the rapid pace of transformation in the digital media field, the merits of a qualitative method become evident. Case study researchers, in most situations, may have few prior notions of variables and how they would be measured (Benbasat et al., 1987), thus the case study method serves as a valid tool that enables researchers to learn about complex instances through extensive description and in-depth investigation within context (Yin, 2003). More crucially, in certain complex cases, it is only possible to generate thorough understanding by focusing on particular instances or cases (Tai, 2006). This is in line with Simons’ assertion that “by focusing in depth and from a holistic perspective, a case study can generate both unique and universal understandings” (1996: 225). In this sense, the case study method is considered to be “more suitable for the exploration, classification and hypothesis development stages of the knowledge building process” (Benbasat et al., 1987: 371). By focusing on certain cases, characteristics of a given genre can thus be classified and contextual implications can be explored as well.

Inspired by the literature above, I have employed the multiple-case study method to conduct the research here on mainstream web journalism. Such an approach is highly qualitative and it focuses on the parameters of specific cases, utilizing a good many sources (e.g. snapshots of news pages, written records, direct observation, statistical

reports and historical documents) as evidence to validate certain conclusions. In this thesis, the case study method follows the recommendation of Yin (1994) and hence has four steps: (1) design the case study, (2) conduct the case study, (3) analyze the case study evidence, and (4) develop the conclusions, recommendations and implications. This chapter will focus on the first step—design the case study for this research. In this thesis, the case study approach has been utilized in analyzing the online in-depth news sections of two news events: the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the H1N1 influenza pandemic (also known as swine flu) in 2009.

As shown in the brief introduction to the cases above, my choice of cases is specific and significant news events that were covered globally. These news events make comparisons across Western and Chinese coverage possible and would also bring to the surface the full logic of the respective media systems. Dayan and Katz's book (1992), *Media events: The live broadcasting of history*, is at the core when concerning key moments in media. Though their theory is based on television events and television viewing early in the 1990s, I find quite a few of their statements remain valid in today's digital era. First of all, the two events had attracted very large audiences worldwide. As Dayan and Katz note, the electronic media rarely realize their full potential because of numerous "intervening mechanisms" that diffuse media consumption, such as multiple messages, time between transmission and reception, and social networks (1992: 15). Recent years have witnessed growing consumer control and fragmented audience attention with the further development of the ICTs. Only on the occasion of special events are these intervening mechanisms suspended; only with the power of these news events, can social integration of the highest order thus achieve via mass communication (Dayan and Katz, 1992). This is consistent with Kornhauser's (1959) finding that during these rare moments of intermission, society is both as atomized and as integrated as a mass-society theorist might ever imagine. These great news events are so overwhelming and all-encompassing that nobody wants to be left and to serve as an out-group. Thus, they have the ability to collect large and intensely engaged audiences. Taking the 2008 Olympic Games as an



instance, in the US, NBC is reported an average of 4.3 million unique users a day on its Olympic website (Nielsen, August 2008). In China, over 217 million Chinese internet users accessed Olympic-related content and an average of 62 million unique visitors viewed Olympic content each day (Nielsen, September 2008). Then, according to a joint report<sup>16</sup> by the CNNIC and Wrating (a survey organization), the visitors to nine Chinese websites with Olympic content recorded 1.7 billion hits. Chinese netizens spent 23.8 hours online per week during the Olympic period, up from 19 hours in June. The report attributed the dramatic numbers, in part, to a move by the IOC that listed the internet as an independent broadcasting organization. The 2008 Beijing Olympics was the first time in the Games' history fans would watch their favourite events online. The H1N1 pandemic was officially the first flu pandemic for 40 years, as noted earlier. As of July 2009, hundreds of people had died and tens of thousands of people were affected globally. It can be argued that significant news events, like the Olympic Games and the H1N1 pandemic, enable new ways of thinking to emerge, and mark advances in media practice. According to Dayan and Katz, media events "have given shape to a new narrative genre that employs the unique potential of the electronic media to command attention universally and simultaneously in order to tell a primordial story about current affairs" (1992: 1). Therefore, significant news events have great effects on participants, such as journalists, journalistic organizations, and the viewers. In this thesis, the focus has been devoted to the impact on journalists and journalistic practices in the context of digital media.

It could be concluded from the discussion above that this thesis is studying special cases of news events that some might argue would have little in common with the everyday media practice. This is not so much a problem for the comparative dimension, as the problem would be the same in both sets of material. Nevertheless, the most convincing factor to support the case studies on significant news events lies in the point that the events are able to give insight into the essence of journalistic

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<sup>16</sup> Available at: [www.cnnic.net.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2008/9/10/111405.pdf](http://www.cnnic.net.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2008/9/10/111405.pdf) (accessed 20 September 2008).

practice and production. Owing to their high news value, media events are usually presented in depth, offered with multi-dimensional coverage and detailed analysis. Media organizations see these events as a valuable chance to showcase the talents of their employees and thus to attract more audiences as well as advertising support. Additionally, news events offer media organizations an opportunity to test new layouts or formats, to embark on technical experimentation and, sometimes, even to redefine the rules of journalism (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Moreover, a handful of journalistic organizations reexamine journalists' practice after great historic events in order to gain valuable experience, hence to shape their everyday practice later on. In this sense, news events serve as an excellent site to improve journalistic practice. In the meantime, they become a good opportunity for media researchers to explore those revolutions and to examine the journalistic practice more closely. It is worth studying how the news story is framed, how audience's interest is sustained, how the story unfolds and is presented, how viewers interact with the media and so on.

Despite the high salience of Dayan and Katz's accounts, it needs to be pointed out that some of their points of view fail to well fit in today's digital environment. As Dayan and Katz argue, media events are monopolistic interruptions of routine; the regular broadcasting schedule is suspended and preempted as the audience is guided by special announcements. However, in digital media, there is less likely to be a disrupted discourse due to the characteristics of these media—the ability to transcend time and space restrictions. Other events may still be given room, but a heavy emphasis has been given to the dramatic events, through prominent placement, in-depth coverage, around-the-clock updating, and so on. Moreover, with the further development of ICTs, recent years have witnessed a weakening of the influence of mass-oriented communication concerning the increasing segmentation of the audience market. As such, the “monopolistic interruptions” of media events seem to be weak in cyberspace. Additionally, by *media* events, Dayan and Katz emphasize television's active roles in terms of “negotiating”, “performing”, “dramatizing”, “fictionalizing”, “celebrating”, “shamanizing” and “reviewing” news events. Through a series of the

*media*'s actions, the events have a dramatic impact on, for example, diplomacy, public opinion, collective memory and so on. This thesis, however, is less interested in this discourse; it studies simply news coverage of significant and specific events, rather than media events.

The different natures of the two events require different ways of operationalising the concerns about how web journalism represents events. For the Olympic case, drawn from quite a few empirical studies (e.g. Larson and Rivenburgh, 1991; Brownell, 1995; Werder and Jung, 2001), Rivenburgh summarized a series of variations found in the international media coverage of the Olympic Games, such as the “amount of media attention given to the Games”, “balance of attention within the event to specific sports, nations and athletes”, and “depth and breadth of topic presentation about the host city, nation and culture” (2004: 6). Additionally, the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games are of great importance to the Olympic-related media research, as the ceremonies contain visually dramatic entertainment elements that often attract a large number of audiences worldwide. For the news coverage of the ceremonies in particular, researchers discovered differences in international reports including “topics discussed during the opening and closing ceremonies”, “balance of attention given to Olympic rites, host cultural performance, advertisements, and specific nations during the parade”, “descriptions of other nations”, and commentary style (Rivenburgh, 2004: 6). The variations elaborated here are quite helpful for the comparative study particularly the textual dimension of the news coverage here. Many of the previous findings were based on analysis of newspaper coverage and broadcasting reports. This study attempts to explore the different kinds of web coverage on the Olympic through comparative analysis between Chinese and Anglo-American news websites.

For the H1N1 influenza case, a five-dimensional construct of risk-related coverage research proposed by Dudo et al. (2007) is employed for its explicit classification and well-defined clarification. Five perspectives, namely, risk magnitude, self-efficacy,

risk comparisons, sensationalism, and thematic and episodic framing, were utilized in Dudo et al.'s study focusing on the "quality" of news coverage of avian flu. By analyzing four major US newspapers, their findings reveal that news coverage was dominated by episodic frames, and displayed high sensationalism but limited information strengthening self-efficacy. In conclusion, Dudo et al. suggested that future research could be conducted on other risk-related issues within international settings.

My study here can be read as a response to that request. However, this case study is less interested in analyzing the "quality"; rather, it uses this framework to closely examine the variations among international news coverage of swine flu. Risk-magnitude information in this case study refers to news content that describes the number of people who have already been infected or died from the disease as well as "how likely individuals are to contract, become ill and/or die from the infectious disease" (Dudo et al., 2007: 435). Roche and Muskavitch underscore the importance of "contextual precision" as to risk-magnitude information—"a low degree of contextual precision holding little information value for the public and a high degree of contextual precision holding greater value" (2003: 354). Dudo et al. further divide the idea of "contextual precision" into three levels. The qualitative description (e.g. "large threat", "extremely bad") represents "the low end of the continuum of contextual precision"; quantitative risk information with no contextual denominator (e.g. "12 people died") represents the "middle range of the contextual precision continuum"; and quantitative risk information with a contextual denominator (e.g. "12 out of 13 died" or "12 out of 3 million died") represents a high level of contextual precision (Dudo et al., 2007: 436). Then two kinds of information are considered as important indicators for increasing self-efficacy concerning infectious diseases: descriptions of symptoms and measures of personal protection (Roche and Muskavitch, 2003). Media scholars emphasize the importance of self-efficacy information, as high levels of self-efficacy correspond to risky situations under control (Witte, 1995; Dudo et al., 2007). Previous researchers have found limited

self-efficacy information within risk-related news articles. For example, the content analysis conducted by Dudo et al. (2007) found that American newspaper stories on avian flu offered little self-efficacy information—12 percent of the stories sampled described symptoms and 9 percent provided protective tips. Moreover, by offering a known risk for comparison, media coverage of risk-comparison information helps viewers understand the situation more clearly (Dudo et al., 2007). Improper comparisons or infrequent and imprecise risk comparisons were found in previous empirical studies of risk-related coverage (e.g. Friedman et al., 1987; Roche and Muskavitch, 2003). Furthermore, to evaluate the utilization of sensationalism in news coverage about risk-related information, Friedman et al. (1987) and Dudo et al. (2007) employed content analysis to assess the extent to which “worst-case scenarios” and “loaded words” were shown. The worst-case scenario refers to “information that depicts the most extreme negative outcome possible” (e.g. could kill millions, breakdown of global economies) and loaded words refer to “emotionally-charged language” (e.g. panic, lethal, huge death toll), according to Dudo et al. (2007: 438, 441). Lastly, the news frame of episodic and thematic contents (Iyengar, 1991) is of great value to assess news coverage within different contexts. The specific event-driven cases that relate to a given issue belong to the episodic news frame and the synthesized events with useful background information belong to the thematic news frame (Nitz and West, 2004). The episodic news frame is often on the basis of “sensational and emotional appeals” (Dudo et al., 2007: 434), while the thematic frame is of great help to clearly present the relationships between issues and “societal and structural factors” (Nitz and West, 2004: 208). In short, the two theoretical frameworks, as elaborated above, would be threaded through the two case studies respectively.

#### 4.4 Research design and specific methods

These three methodological strategies (genre analysis, comparative analysis and case study analysis) come together in two open-ended questions. The overall topic for inquiry of this study is: *What are the distinctive characteristics of the mainstream web*

*news genre in China?* The main research question has been divided into the following sub-questions:

1. What characterizes Chinese mainstream web journalism? Does that differ from the characteristics of Anglo-American mainstream web journalism?
2. What contextual factors have mainly shaped web journalism in China?

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is twofold:

1. To identify essential elements that constitute the mainstream web news genre and thus to propose distinctive features of Chinese web journalism through comparing those essences of Chinese web news with those of the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand;
2. To explain the contextual implications of mainstream web news genres and position the genre within social-cultural circumstances and relevant specialized areas.

The general research design is qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual. The three research methods mentioned above have been employed as follows. The genre theoretical framework is applied here to characterize typical characteristics of mainstream web news genres within different contexts. Distinctive features of Chinese web journalism are expected to be explored through comparative analysis between Chinese and Anglo-American web news genres. Case studies of news events provide valuable opportunities for a close examination of the journalistic practice and production. Admittedly, each method has both strengths and weaknesses. The use of several methods helps to minimize the limitations of research that employs only one method. More importantly, a combined methodological approach is able to address different facets of a research issue and thus to establish the external validity of the research. Through case studies of significant news events, this thesis outlines the way in which web news is created, presented and distributed. Distinctive features of Chinese web journalism have been identified by comparative analysis between web news in China and that in the US, UK, and New Zealand via synchronic studies. The contextual implications would be explored by further qualitative genre study, with the

aid of relevant research, survey or report supplements.

### *Mainstream news websites under analysis*

The keyword for my choice of news websites under analysis is “mainstream”. As mentioned before, by “mainstream”, I emphasize the news material created by journalistic professionals who work for mainstream driven news organizations that have sizeable audience bases. The selection of news websites under analysis was generally based on two principles. First, the website is orientated towards professionalized “quality” journalism. Second, the website has a considerable number of users and is amongst the most popular internet outlets within the respective countries. With the two principles in mind, I have consulted a few authoritative reports and surveys, namely, web traffic rankings since 2001 from the well-known web information company Alexa ([www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com)), the annual research reports since 2001 from the semi-official China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), and news websites rankings since 2004 from top.Chinalabs.com.<sup>17</sup> In light of those reports and surveys, the selected websites below can be regarded as the most relevant news websites in their respective countries.

China:

News sections of four web portals:

Sina (<http://news.sina.com.cn>)

Sohu (<http://news.sohu.com>)

Netease (<http://news.163.com>)

QQ (<http://news.qq.com>)

Xinhua News Agency’s online counterpart:

Xinhua ([www.xinhuanet.com](http://www.xinhuanet.com))

China Central Television’s news website:

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<sup>17</sup> Top.Chinalabs.com is a key distribution site of China Internet Index System (CIIS).

CCTV ([www.cctv.com](http://www.cctv.com))

The United States:

*The New York Times* ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))

NBC news ([www.nbc.com/News\\_and\\_Sports](http://www.nbc.com/News_and_Sports))

The United Kingdom:

*The Guardian* ([www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk))

BBC news ([www.newsbbc.com](http://www.newsbbc.com))

New Zealand:

*The New Zealand Herald* ([www.nzherald.co.nz](http://www.nzherald.co.nz))

Television New Zealand ([www.tvnz.co.nz](http://www.tvnz.co.nz))

With regard to the news websites under analysis, a few aspects need to be clarified. Firstly, it appears that the above list of news websites is a little bit biased, since there are six Chinese news websites under study while only two news websites from each of the Western countries. The logic behind that choice was: a) Chinese web journalism is the kernel of this thesis; b) in most situations, the web journalism in Anglo-American countries would be analyzed as a unit. In that sense, six news websites in Anglo-American contexts are corresponding with six news websites in China. Secondly, the actual research objects are in-depth news sections for news events. For the specific event, a further selection from the above news websites might be necessary to ensure the effectiveness of this research. As noted, different types of news websites may be good at presenting different news events. For example, television's affiliated websites are probably advantageous in presenting events such as the Beijing Olympic Games. Therefore, different cases may have different emphases



in the news websites under study.

Thirdly, despite more and more Chinese news websites having launched their English versions, in this research no English version of the Chinese news website was chosen to be studied, for that choice would weaken the validity of this study. Those English versions may not fully represent what was presented in the native-language news pages, which were much more widely consumed by the Chinese public. In other words, those English versions are far from “mainstream” in the eyes of the Chinese. Lastly, I acknowledge that a few more news websites in the four countries may also fall into the mainstream journalism genre and deserve further examination. However, for the sake of limiting the scope of the research, I constrain my research objects to the above list of news websites.

### *Limitations*

One of the most prominent constraints on this study lies in the Olympic video access. The video content of the Games is geographically restricted. Thus I was unable to watch video on the UK, the US and China sites, which is barred in New Zealand. The comparison of video coverage on matches and opening and closing ceremonies is impossible to conduct. Nevertheless, off-site interviews, talk-shows, and other video clips alike are not restricted just to the domestic audience. Video comparisons of this kind of material were possible in the study. Given the focus of this research is genre distinctions of web news originated from Chinese and Western countries, the omission of detailed comparison of the Games video coverage (e.g. variations of commentaries, editing tactics) would not seriously affect the main enquiry of the research.

Additionally, this study contributes little to variations with each media system. It devotes less attention to discrepancies that exist between news websites in the US, the UK and New Zealand, as well as to between news websites within the same country, though I am aware of that existence and acknowledge those dynamics of the systems are important to web journalism studies. For this thesis, the analyzing lens is

constrained more towards distinctions between Chinese and Western web news genres in order to deduct meaningful results and better serve the main purpose and this study.

Furthermore, due to the fluid nature of the online environment, I am able to take only snapshots of its presence. Some alterations in news pages are not represented. Given the unlikelihood that a research can cover exactly everything, the qualitative analysis here is a non-exhaustive base that intends to explore the most relevant aspects.

Only a small number of websites have been examined, hence people may doubt the general conclusions it draws. However, since I have included popular and representative websites in their respective countries, as shown above, the results are likely to reflect the leading trends in this area. Of course, an even wider choice of internet media is helpful to extend the validity of the overall findings. An examination of web-based media in France, Russia, Malaysia, for instance, may reveal more constructive information.

Last but not least, the object of this study is restricted to genre analysis of the news websites, which limits the understanding of the genre as viewed by news consumers. Future study should include investigation of the audience to fully capture the audience's perception of the news genre on the web.

## 5. Case study of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

### 5.1 Introduction

As introduced in the background chapter, the organizers of the Olympic Games, as one of the world's biggest news events, have struggled to adapt to an increasingly online world. Video and audio transmissions of the Games were until recently banned from the web, since the IOC makes most of its money by selling rights to television broadcasters. The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was the first ever Olympic Games to have a wide variety of digital coverage available on the web around the globe. NBC of the US, BBC of the UK, TVNZ of New Zealand and CCTV of China gained the internet broadcasting rights. After CCTV sold the web broadcasting rights to another eight Chinese websites, there were a total of nine websites<sup>18</sup> in China offering Olympic video coverage, in contrast to the sole online video provider of the 2008 Games in each of the three Western countries. The relatively more competitive environment of the Chinese online industry is likely to give rise to a distinctive landscape as to the online coverage of the 2008 Olympics.

This case study focuses on the news content online during the Beijing Olympic Games, ranging from 8 August 2008 to 24 August 2008. As elaborated in the chapter on theory and method, the in-depth news sections on the Olympics from twelve mainstream news websites worldwide, namely NYT<sup>19</sup> and NBC in the US, BBC and Guardian in the UK, NZHerald and TVNZ in New Zealand, together with CCTV, Xinhuanet and four popular web portals were taken into close analysis. The analysis here is divided into four dimensions that are crucial to the study of web journalism. Firstly, as a significant visual event, the Olympic Games offered a valuable opportunity for a close examination of how multimedia employs multiple senses and

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<sup>18</sup> The nine websites that purchased the rights to broadcast the 2008 Olympic Games were: the internet affiliate of CCTV, four web portals (Sohu, Sina, QQ and NetEase), a video sharing website (Ku6) and P2P video streaming websites (Uusee, PPstream and PPlive).

<sup>19</sup> For convenience, websites of newspapers were not put in italics if cited alone. Only in the case of, for example, "the website of the *New York Times*", would the newspaper be put in italics.

multiple channels of storytelling online (Fagerjord, 2003; Kawamoto, 2003). Particular attention has been devoted to the difference between Chinese and Western websites in the application of the “navigational role” of multimedia elements (King, 1998; Bardoel, 1996; Kawamoto, 2003, Väliaho and Lundgren, 2005), the value of news images (Zelizer, 2005), the remediation of new media (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), and the multimedia news packages (Zerba, 2004). Secondly, the interactivity of news websites, as the main distinguishing characteristic of the online environment, is analyzed on the basis of the inactive and active interactivity framework proposed by Hong et al. (2008). Then with the help of Heeter’s well-defined model of feature analysis, this phase of study explores both the availability and the actual function of interactive features within the news in-depth sections. In particular, a range of Web 2.0 devices, such as blogs, Twitter, discussion forums, live chat rooms, and curiosity-arousal devices, have been closely analyzed in this aspect of analysis. Thirdly, the hypertextuality of the news websites is examined mainly in terms of context-provision (Kawamoto, 1998; Pavlik, 2001), non-linear approach (Mitra and Cohen, 1999; Hall, 2001), and the different uses of internal and external hyperlinks (Deuze, 2001), according to the literature. The core purpose of this aspect of analysis is to investigate the role of hypertexts and hyperlinks in facilitating different kinds of digital convergence and (or) different levels of the depth of coverage in the arena of web journalism. The last object of analysis is the textual news coverage of the Olympic news sections. Despite the increasing popularity of multimedia and interactive news on the web, news in texts is and is likely still to be the cornerstone of web journalism for some time. Based on Rivenburgh’s (2004) summary of variations found in previous empirical research on Olympic news coverage, the analysis in this case study explores various dynamics in the news flow, such as sources, updates, balance, varieties, contexts, comprehensiveness, the story length, and the emphasis of news topics. I acknowledge that the textual practice might be largely influenced by the source (usually the print or news agency) texts. Nevertheless, I argue that the choice of texts and the deployment of textual news (e.g. frequent updating) present distinctive features of the different forms of web news genre. The possible reliance on

those other media for the textual news is a relevant but not a dominant concern to this case study, since the main emphasis here is the comparison between Anglo-American and Chinese news. Several aspects commonly studied in previous Olympic-related research, namely, the news coverage on the opening and closing ceremonies, and the news coverage of key competitions and gold medalists, are analyzed in this case study as examples to further explore online journalistic practice.

## 5.2 Multimediality

In the field of web journalism, scholars (e.g. Fagerjord, 2003; Kawamoto, 2003; Deuze, 2004) are inclined to demonstrate how multimedia employs multiple senses and multiple channels of storytelling. Based on this literature, the study of the multimediality of mainstream news websites firstly examines minor elements constituting multimedia news contents. By deconstructing the concept of “multi-media” in terms of representational dimensions of graphics, photos, animations, audio and video, the study here closely examines how these minor elements work alone or function in different journalistic contexts within different countries. In particular, with the help of the Olympic case, the first stage of analysis (sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2) attempts to contribute to some intensively discussed issues noted in the literature review, for example, the values of news images (Zelizer, 2005), the “navigational role” of multimedia content (King, 1998; Bardoel, 1996; Kawamoto, 2003, Väliäho and Lundgren, 2005), the newness and originality of multimedia journalism (Deuze, 1999) and the remediation of new media (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Then the second stage of analysis (section 5.2.3) focuses on the integration of these multimedia components, based on theories of “rhetorical convergence” (Fagerjord, 2003), “true multimedia experience” (Stabe, 2007), “packaged journalism online” (Zerba, 2004) and differences between the “superficial multimediality” and Deuze’s (2003) “divergent paradigm”. Particular attention is devoted to the differences between Chinese and Western websites in terms of the actual utilization of multimedia news within their specific contexts.

### 5.2.1 Graphic Olympics

As to the use of graphics, two dimensions are studied here: firstly, the overall characteristics of graphic presentation and utilization are elaborated through the analysis on top banner design, navigational menus, and the placement and structure of photo subsections; secondly, by taking the high-profile opening ceremony as an instance, the analysis focuses on specific features of picture utilization, such as the logic of picture selection, the number of pictures presented, captions, sources, and styles of picture galleries. A key concern of the second phase of analysis lies in how images function in online news within different contexts. Zelizer (2005) has listed several facets of the values surrounding news images within journalism, in particular, emphasizing the understanding of them as the message of eyewitnesses, as an impetus for compelling public attention, as mirrors of events, and as a reflection of the world at large. On the basis of Zelizer's argument, this study analyzes how graphics work in the online journalistic environment within different media contexts.

#### *Overall characteristics*

The close examination of top banners reveals a number of cultural differences between Chinese and Western web design. There is a generally heavy use of pictures and graphics among the Chinese in-depth sections studied here. Chinese red was widely utilized by the websites as the background for the top banner, which connotes a festive viewing for the audience. The heavy top banner in Chinese in-depth sections, as shown below, contrasts sharply with the simple banner of their Western counterparts.

Examples of top banners at in-depth sections:<sup>20</sup>

CCTV:

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<sup>20</sup> The snapshots of top banners were taken on 24 August 2008, the closing day of the Beijing Olympics. There were no dramatic changes of the top banner design during the research time, thus the snapshots can be regarded as typical.



QQ:



Sohu:



Sina:



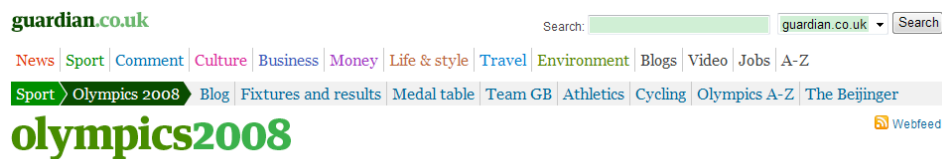
BBC:



NZHerald:



Guardian:



NYT:



Chinese news websites tend to make heavy use of graphics, presumably to highlight the great importance of the news event and to bring the excitement of the Olympics to the audience. Such a tactic is not favoured by the Western news websites. Western designers might perhaps regard the Chinese layout and design as “visual anarchy” that is “very active” and “apparently very chaotic” (De Vries, 2008: 21). Western online media seem to deliberately avoid heavy banners as well as colourful backgrounds, which might be characterized as being sensational or even as bad taste in design. The finding here supports De Vries’ argument that newspaper design has its cultural differences. De Vries notes that “cultural and reading differences” play an important role in the “perception of chaos and order”, as the way a reader views and understands Chinese characters might be very different to the Western sequence (2008: 21, 24).

Moreover, news pictures are mostly shown within separate subsections in the Chinese news websites, while news images at Western websites are largely employed as part of the news story. The close examination here finds that the category of “pictures” was an absolutely essential component in the navigational menu among Chinese news websites, while only a few Western websites attached much importance to the picture subsection. Among the Chinese sites, the Olympic pictures were treated as a separate category and the subsection for Olympic images was in fact granted its own



easy-to-be-recalled web address, as listed below:

Sohu: <http://2008.sohu.com/photo/>;

Sina: <http://2008.sina.com.cn/photo/>;

QQ: <http://2008.qq.com/photo/>;

NetEase: <http://2008.163.com/photo/>;

Xinhuanet: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/olympics/aytp/>;

CCTV: <http://2008.cctv.com/photo/index.shtml>.

Chinese websites studied here underlined the subsection by every means. The hyperlinked word “photos” was placed at almost every possibly prominent place—in top navigational menus, beside breaking news, along with news stories, as well as inside side bars. Furthermore, Chinese websites preferred to employ very detailed subcategories in a hierarchical structure to compose the “photo” subsection. For example, along with “pictures”, Sohu had “latest photos”,<sup>21</sup> “features”, “gold moment”, “stars”, and “facial expression” at the top navigational menu. In addition to “photos”, “high definition (HD) pictures” and “live report with pictures and texts” were displayed on Sina’s navigational menu. More examples within this area will be identified further in the second phase of the analysis, when the opening ceremony is taken as an example.

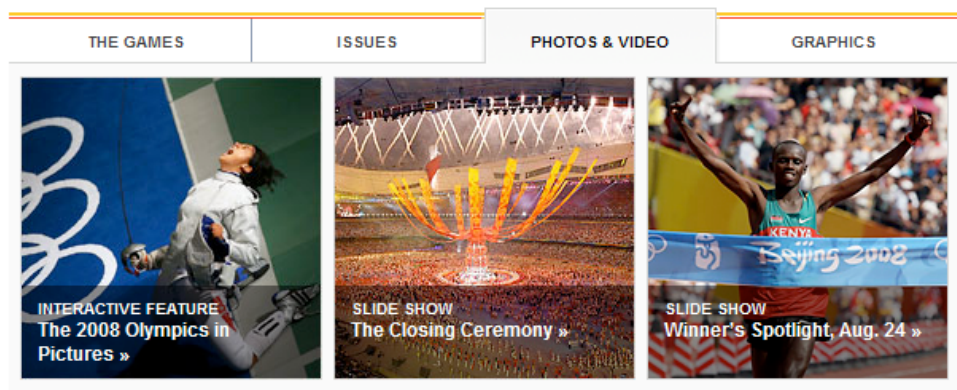
In contrast, the Anglo-American websites studied here were more likely to incorporate pictures into news and placed less emphasis on highlighting the photo as a separate category. For example, the BBC and the Guardian did not put “photos” into their navigational menus for the Olympics. Indeed, it is BBC practice to offer “low graphics” versions of its web pages, which means news pages with text only or very few pictures. This is convenient for dial-up or narrowband internet users as well as those who do not want the web page full of graphics. Such a practice is part of the overall BBC policy and suggests that BBC takes note of minority groups among its users, despite the ever-increasing number of broadband users. The NYT site did not

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<sup>21</sup> These items at Chinese websites were translated by the author.

have a specific navigational menu for the Olympic Games. The photo category was available through a medium-sized<sup>22</sup> slideshow on top of the in-depth section, as shown below.

NYT's slideshow:



Instead of presenting pictures here and there, the NYT integrated multimedia elements, such as video, pictures, and graphics into a slideshow. This was a popular journalistic practice among the Western sites: NBC and TVNZ also possessed similar slideshows. Moreover, Western websites did not favour the hierarchical structure of its photo subsections that the Chinese sites did; most sites preferred categorizing photos in terms of the Olympic fortnight's separate days. For example, slide shows were often entitled as “day 12 action” (TVNZ), “Team GB on day 14” (Guardian), and “day 16: photos of the Games” (NBC).

Further analysis on the picture subsection indicates the different journalistic selection logics between Chinese and Western websites. Chinese sites tended to be less selective and instead intensively pursued comprehensiveness and all-inclusive productions, while Western sites usually emphasized elite content or highly selected news productions. The photo subsection at Chinese websites contained many more pictures/thumbnails than the Western subsection possessed: 20-30 thumbnails were

<sup>22</sup> By medium, it is meant that the picture (or slideshow) occupies roughly one or two columns in width, distinguishing it from the thumbnail and from the large picture that occupies at least half a screen.

typically shown at the photo subsection of the Western sites, while at least double that number was typical in Chinese subsections. For example, at the lowest end of the spectrum, CCTV had around 50 clickable thumbnails on the front page of its photo subsection, while Sohu had the most, with more than 100 thumbnails. In contrast, Western photo subsections were much more concise than their Chinese counterparts. A typical structure for the photo subsection in the West comes from the Guardian. There were 65 galleries in total, from 8 August to 24 August, at the Guardian's subsection of "in pictures".<sup>23</sup> One single web page displayed 15 galleries, and each gallery was represented by a thumbnail picture, with a camera icon on the top left. Titles, dates, the number of pictures that were enclosed in the gallery, and brief captions, were listed below the thumbnails.

The Guardian's picture subsection:



**Olympics closing ceremony**  
 Gallery (29 pictures):  
 24 Aug 2008  
 The closing ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Olympics



**Olympics: the best pictures from day 16's action**  
 Gallery (16 pictures):  
 24 Aug 2008  
 The best photographs on the final day of the Beijing games



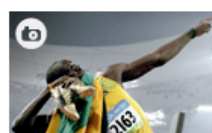
**Olympics: Tom Jenkins Gallery of day 15**  
 Gallery (8 pictures):  
 23 Aug 2008  
 Olympics: Tom Jenkins Gallery of day 15 of the Beijing Olympics



**Olympics: the best pictures from day 15's action**  
 Gallery (16 pictures):  
 23 Aug 2008  
 The best pictures from the penultimate day of the Games in Beijing



**Olympics: Gold medals at the Games on day 15**  
 Gallery (17 pictures):  
 23 Aug 2008  
 Day 15: Gold medals at the Olympics 2008 in Beijing



**Celebration time: Beijing Olympics 2008**  
 Gallery (13 pictures):  
 22 Aug 2008  
 The best images of victory from this year's Games

Most other Western websites had a similar structure for their photo subsections, but in a more compact way. For example, TVNZ displayed 28 picture galleries at its photo subsection by 24 August, with only titles below thumbnails and with no link of "more

<sup>23</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/olympics2008+content/gallery> (accessed 24 August 2008).

photos”. NBC had a similarly laconic photo subsection, with 23 thumbnails (including three featured galleries on top) for galleries and a “view more” hyperlink, but without dates and captions.

More importantly, pictures at Chinese Olympic sections were dramatically employed as an impetus for compelling viewers’ attention. A particular emphasis on gold medal winners and human-interest stories dominated the picture subsection. A huge number of slide shows concerned gold medal winners and related sporting moments. The “gold moment” (Sohu), “champions” (QQ), “golden path” (Sina), “grab the gold and seize the silver” (Xinhuanet) were a few of the most prominent categories in the photo subsection, exemplifying the dedication to gold. Moreover, a few websites utilized unusual tactics to highlight the gold. As displayed below, under the top banner of QQ’s in-depth section, there were two rows of numbers, from 01 to 51 (as of 24 August).

A list of gold medals at QQ.com:



The number in the snapshot above indicates the number of gold medals won by the Chinese team. When one moves the mouse onto the number, a small box would pop up. It displayed a photo of the gold medal winner(s) and a brief introduction to the related sports. The snapshot above shows the winner of the 35<sup>th</sup> gold medal. Of course, viewers can click the item, either on the picture or on the number. For example, a click on “35” would guide users to a separate web page, <http://2008.qq.com/zhuanti/china35thgold.htm>, which is full of news, comments, pictures

and video on the 35<sup>th</sup> gold medal winner as well as related sporting events. Similarly, NetEase placed a special slideshow highlighting the latest medal winner(s), as shown below.

The slide show of gold medalists at NetEase.com:



Users could slide back to view previous gold winner(s) in the Games. The name of the gold medalist(s), the discipline, and hyperlinks to related video and photos were offered at every thumbnail there.

Another prominent trait of picture galleries at Chinese websites was the intense focus on human interest stories. Behind-the-scenes pictures were particularly popular. Perhaps because too many similar or exactly the same shots were available inside Olympic venues, news websites in China were eager to seek pictures outside the venue or behind the scenes to attract viewers. Special attention had been devoted to entertainment and emotional themes, such as beauties, sexy men, humor, embarrassment, as well as “hugs and kiss”. For example, NetEase designed a dramatically extraordinary gallery entitled “I dedicate the Olympics to you—visual graphics of 2008”, as shown below.



Human-interest focused picture gallery at NetEase.com:



This collection of slide shows placed particular emphasis on human-interest stories. Twenty-five Chinese characters were displayed in the middle of the gallery and each character represented a specific theme for a slide show. There was no obvious logical connection between the twenty-five themes and the only possible logic behind these characters, “kiss”, “tear”, “leg”, “surprise”, “tongue”, “child”, “shadow”, “speed”, for example, was to attract eyeballs. With the help of the red background, Chinese characters, and bamboo decorations, the picture gallery was designed to be very “Chinese” to attract the Chinese’s attention. It seems that information or content was less important, while the playfulness of the internet dominated the journalistic practice here. Largely driven by the commercial factor, Chinese mainstream news websites paid particular attention to “curiosity arousal devices” that contributed to a pleasurable experience when consuming the sites. This is in line with Ha and James’ (1998) interpretation of play theory—“mass media content is play for the audience, not just information”—discussed further below. Other Chinese websites, such as CCTV, Sina, QQ and Sohu, also had similar galleries. Xinhuanet probably is the most serious site among all the Chinese websites under study. Xinhuanet had a wide variety of pictures focusing on ceremonial activities in which the Chinese authorities participated during the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, we can still find a good many

feature-oriented pictures at Xinhuanet under the titles of, such as, “oh, yeah”, “don’t fight”, and “let me see clearly”. Therefore, generally speaking, there is a heavy feature orientation in image use among Chinese news sites. The value of news images lies largely in drawing the public’s attention, allowing users to play, and thus gaining more clicks.

### *Specific Features*

During the Olympic Games, picture utilization was perhaps the most intensive when covering the opening ceremony. Thus, this phase of analysis takes photos of the opening ceremony as an instance to explore specific features of picture use and presentation, such as the logic of picture selection, captions, sources, time stamps, and styles of galleries. Differences between Western and Chinese news websites are evident here. The analysis strongly suggests that the Western tactic of picture utilization is in accordance with Zelizer’s notions on news images. News images are “used as pegs not to specific events but to stories larger than can be told in a simple news item” (Zelizer, 2005: 28). In order to work well in journalism, news pictures are selected to be “composite, more schematic than detailed, conventionalized, and simplified” (Zelizer, 2005: 28). The Chinese practice seems to be more or less the opposite and reveals a news value of pursuing detail and comprehensiveness, rather than selection and edition. A weak degree of “gatekeeping” is evident in terms of the picture employment among Chinese websites.

The BBC and the Guardian presented photos in a relatively modest way, while each has paid particular attention to matters of cultural memory and knowledge construction. For the Opening Ceremony, the BBC offered 21 pictures in its slide show of “Opening ceremony photos”.<sup>24</sup> Both the number and the size of pictures are the smallest among all the websites under study. Neither thumbnails, options of full-screen view, nor automatic slides were available. Moreover, the slide show was not presented in a separate web page within a specifically designed background, as a

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<sup>24</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/olympics/7548773.stm> (accessed 12 August 2008).

few websites did; instead, it was in the middle column and stayed in the same style as news stories. The website of the *Guardian* shared a few common traits with the BBC concerning opening ceremony photos. The slide show of “Beijing Olympics: Opening ceremony”<sup>25</sup> employed neither fancy background, nor full-screen view. It had a similarly small number (22) of pictures enclosed. In this sense, it can be concluded that slide shows for the opening ceremony at the two British sites did not focus on visual attraction. Rather, clear captions, timestamps and sources together with related links have demonstrated their distinctive characteristics—to inform, to educate, rather than simply to entertain the public. The assumption that “images matter as a reflection of the world at large” is evident here (Zelizer, 2005: 28). Instances from the “see also” links besides the opening slide show confirm this point. Under the title “How does Olympic ceremony compare?”, the BBC designed a slide show of 18 pictures, comparing the 2008 Opening Ceremony with previous Olympic ceremonies, such as the 1896 Olympics. Each old picture there had a very detailed description alongside it, introducing the historical story of the Olympics. To complement the opening ceremony photos, another “see also” link was a slide show called “Picture power”, in which large HD pictures were displayed. The emphasis of the set of graphics is not only on the visual impression, but also on narratives behind the graphic. Beside those pictures, photographers explained the story behind the picture, for example, how they managed to capture that particular moment.

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<sup>25</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/gallery/2008/aug/08/olympics2008.china?picture=336347295> (accessed 12 August 2008).



“Picture power: The moon and the torch” at the website of the BBC<sup>26</sup>:



I was running late, rushing from my last job to the Bird's Nest for the men's 100m final - as I turned the corner with one of my colleagues we saw a full moon rising above the stadium and we could not believe our luck!

I had to decide if it would be worth stopping to shoot this picture and risk losing my spot in the stadium - I decided I could shoot this image quickly.

Luckily I had a long lens with me, as it would have been difficult to capture the image without it. I waited a few minutes for the moon to move in line with the torch and this was the result. (contributed by the photographer Ryan Pierse)

The above is an instance from the BBC's gallery of “picture power”. The vivid first-person description of how he captured that beautiful moment has significantly increased the ability of this picture to connect the audience to the event depicted. The value of this picture lies in the extent to which it promotes “photographic verisimilitude” and “helps journalists credential their accounts of events as they happen” (Zelizer, 2005: 29).

The emphasis on the individual photographer's contribution is a prominent feature of the Western websites. There are a handful of instances in this regard. For example,

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<sup>26</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/olympics/7567746.stm> (accessed 23 August 2008).

among the Guardian's 65 photo galleries, there were nine galleries with headlines underlining the photographer Tom Jenkins and one indicating the photographer Dan Chung's best photos.<sup>27</sup> NYT online designed a gallery entitled "The Ceremonies",<sup>28</sup> incorporating picture displays and audio. The audio clip included voices of photographers, introducing their experience of witnessing the Beijing Olympics. The casual talk of photographers serves to shorten the distance between the picture and picture-viewers and thus enhances intimacy to some extent. Photographs together with the audio here are to send the message of "eyewitness" authority. The notion of "having been there" is evident via the photo display. In contrast, the practice of highlighting an individual photographer's work is very rare within Chinese in-depth sections. Not a single gallery at Chinese photo subsections had this kind of headline or introduction. More precisely, many photos shown at Chinese websites were captioned with information on the agencies or associations from which they were obtained (e.g. Xinhua, Sina Sports), rather than the names of photographers.

Hofstede's (1980; 1991) cultural model of collectivism-individualism might be useful to explain the difference of source indications between Chinese and Western websites. The foundation of Chinese culture is Confucianism that prioritizes collectivism, while most Western countries are often characterized by individualism. My findings that Chinese websites usually indicate picture sources in terms of news agencies or associations, while Western websites at times highlight the effort of individual photographers tends to echo the different cultural values. Another possible contributing factor to the finding here is the journalistic tradition. As mentioned above, there were very many pictures in the Chinese websites, and thus it might be difficult for journalists to give detailed sources for each picture. In the West, the journalistic professionals usually selected a small number of pictures to present to the audience,

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<sup>27</sup> Here are a few examples of those headlines: "Olympics: Tom Jenkins Gallery", "Photographers Tom Jenkins at the Olympics", "Olympics: Tom Jenkins' photographs on day 10", "Olympic: Tom Jenkins' best pictures", and "Olympics: Dan Chung's best photos on day 10".

<sup>28</sup> Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/sports/olympics/2008-pictures-of-the-olympics/index.html> (accessed 25 August 2008).

and the source indication was part of their editing work. As Zelizer observes, “what journalists decide to do with the photographs that are incorporated as part of news thus always invokes more than just the photograph itself, with negotiations over selection, placement, prominence, and size involving more than just the photographer who takes the shot and the photo editor who positions it on the page” (2005: 31).

Compared with the British websites’ relatively plain way of displaying pictures, the NYT tended to take full advantage of interactive means to present graphics. The web page in an all-black background was specifically designed for photo slide shows, which was quite different from the NYT’s front page style. Pictures of the opening ceremony were displayed in both regular slide shows and interactive galleries. As to the regular slide show, there were two unique features of the NYT’s. Firstly, users needed to “sign in” to email or save the picture. Though it says the registration is “free and only takes a minute”, asking users to register in order to send and save still interferes with interaction with the news content. Then besides clear source indication and detailed captions, the NYT also provided a “more slide shows” link. A row of related thumbnails, a search engine box, and related tags were shown in a small window on top of the slide show, as shown below.

Pop-up box of more slide shows at the NYT:

The screenshot shows a slide show on the New York Times website. The slide itself depicts a large stadium with a vibrant red ceiling, where several people in traditional Chinese clothing are standing on a red carpet. A pop-up box is overlaid on the slide, providing navigation and search options. The pop-up box includes the New York Times logo, a search bar for slide shows, and a grid of five thumbnail images with their respective titles: 'The Rise of Lucha Libre', 'The New Yankee Stadium', 'Final Round at the Masters', 'Chicago Makes Bid for 2016 Olympics', and 'Connecticut Wins the N.C.A.A. Championship'. To the right of the thumbnails is a list of categories: WORLD, U.S., N.Y. / REGION, BUSINESS, TECHNOLOGY, SPORTS, SCIENCE, HEALTH, ARTS, STYLE, TRAVEL, and REAL ESTATE. Below the main slide, there are 'E-MAIL' and 'SHARE' buttons. On the right side of the page, there is an article snippet titled 'China's Leaders Try to Impress and Reassure World' and a section for 'Ads by Google' featuring three advertisements: 'Valuable Beijing Tour', 'Luxury China Tours', and 'Computer Leasing NZ'.

Unlike related links at other sites that would direct users to a newly opened page, the NYT's pop-up box showed much more information in an unobtrusive way. Moreover, what appears to significantly differentiate the NYT's provision of pictures from that of other sites is the former's stronger reliance on interactive graphics. A panorama<sup>29</sup> of the opening ceremony was offered by the site and it comprised a series of photographs taken over a short period of time. Users could view full screen, stop/start rotation as well as click and drag the mouse over the image to move the view in any direction. It creates a 360-degree view to draw users into examining the National Stadium closely. As early as 2001, Pavlik was excited about the emerging new media technology of omnidirectional imaging. He had examined the 360-degree imaging in depth as an instance of the wide spectrum of new devices that might be influencing the practice and content of journalism. As Pavlik (2001) discovered, most news organizations, such as the NYT online, had utilized 360-degree views frequently for features, but rarely had they used the images to tell a story. Instead, the panoramic view had been largely used as novel complements to accompanying text coverage. My findings here are almost in par with Pavlik's examinations. The omnidirectional view for the opening ceremony was standing by itself, incorporating neither audio/video, nor texts/hypertexts. Except for the NYT, no other websites studied here employed the panorama.

To explore the possible reason for the unpopularity of the panorama within web news, "remediation" theory seems to be helpful here. Bolter and Grusin contend that "remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media" and they define "the representation of one medium in another" as "remediation" (1999: 45). Though the digital medium "can try to refashion the older medium or media entirely" (1999: 46), it is important to note that "every act of remediation...ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced" and "the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways" (1999: 47). The panorama, incorporating almost no element of the old medium, can only with difficult "function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning" (1999: 55). Moreover, remediation theory emphasizes that "media are continually

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<sup>29</sup> "View of the Opening Ceremonies", available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/08/08/sports/olympics/20080808\\_OPENING\\_PANO.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/08/08/sports/olympics/20080808_OPENING_PANO.html) (accessed 9 August 2008).

commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media” (1999: 55). In other word, as Bolter and Grusin summarize, “media need each other in order to function as media at all” (1999: 55). In this sense, the panorama presented at NYT seems to be too new to function as media. In the next stage, as Pavlik (2001) predicted, the 360-degree imaging would be accompanied with facts and contexts for the image in an audio narration with ambient sound, and it can be panned, tilted or zoomed freely. This is a trend of remediation, shifting towards a combination of multimedia and interactivity, which will be further explored later in the section of multimedia packages.

Within Chinese websites, the detailed hierarchical structure, discussed in the previous section on overall features, also governs the use of photos for the opening ceremony. All Chinese websites designed a specific subsection for the opening ceremony, as revealed from the web address.<sup>30</sup> Dozens of slide shows on themes, such as “fireworks”, “performance”, “parade”, “flame”, “flag bearer” and so on, constituted the photo area in each site’s subsection on the opening ceremony. The highly hierarchical content structure may respond to the hierarchical structure of Chinese society. Moreover, websites of Xinhua and CCTV showed a number of photos focusing on material other than China or the Chinese. Presidents, celebrities, and athletes of other countries were included in various slide shows. The number of opening ceremony pictures in any Chinese websites under study is considerably larger than that of any researching Western website. The typical number that Chinese websites provided was around 600 (e.g. Sina had 637 in total), while Western sites usually offered no more than 100, and some even had less than 30 (e.g. TVNZ had 22 in total). Of course, this difference is greatly related to the fact that China is the host nation for the 2008 Olympics. However, the Beijing Olympics is not exceptional for Chinese web journalism; the huge number of pictures in Chinese in-depth sections is quite common in relation to other stories as well. It reveals a keen online journalistic culture in pursuit of comprehensive news coverage. If there is an overarching doctrine that underpins this kind of practice, then it can be identified in making use of the internet’s potential to as large extent as possible, since this philosophy has been

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<sup>30</sup> Addresses for the subsection of the opening ceremony: QQ: <http://2008.qq.com/openingceremony/>, CCTV: <http://2008.cctv.com/kaimushi/26/index.shtml> [‘kaimushi’ is pinyin for opening ceremony], Xinhuanet: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/olympics/20080808bj/> etc.

incessantly underlined by both Chinese scholars (e.g. Peng<sup>31</sup>, 2005) and Chinese authorities in charge of new media (e.g. Tian, 2007). As examined in the section on overall features of visual elements and as is demonstrated repeatedly elsewhere in my thesis, the goal of being comprehensive seems to dominate online journalistic practice in China.

With regard to the specific style of galleries, Chinese websites competed with each other by foregrounding graphic attraction or the visual impression to a large extent. HD pictures seemed to be an essential part of the opening ceremony galleries. Except for Xinhuanet, no other websites neglected this aspect. To be distinctive, Sohu offered three styles of slide shows—a classic style, an Apple style and a full screen view, as shown below.

The Apple-style slide show at Sohu:



To highlight an Apple-style slide show is a rare practice in the West and it might also sound unusual to people other than Chinese. Nevertheless, it is the particular Chinese social context that promotes Sohu's emphasis on an Apple style. Due to their

<sup>31</sup> Peng Lan is one of the pioneers in studies of web-based media in China.

relatively high price, Apple products are novelties in China and a great majority of computer users in China are PC consumers. In the face of the fierce competition of the online market, Sohu probably wanted to use the novelty to arouse viewers' attention and offer something of a luxury product. Similarly, QQ employed slide shows in cool black to attract users' eyeballs. The high definition slide show is like NYT's slide show at first glance—all black background, thumbnail below, and a “more pictures” link. The slightly Western-like appearance made QQ's gallery stand out from numerous slide shows at Chinese websites.

In addition, captions and sources at Chinese websites had been treated very differently from those of Western websites. It is quite common that a set of pictures usually shared the same caption, and some slide shows even had neither captions nor sources (e.g. NetEase's high definition slide show for the opening ceremony). One contributing factor to this phenomenon is the relatively large amount of material during the Olympics. For the opening ceremony, there were hundreds of pictures at each website. It would involve a huge workload for online editors to give each picture a unique caption and also might be impractical in the face of demands for immediacy. To view this phenomenon from another angle, a good many pictures with few or no captions might suggest an online journalistic logic of providing more choice and less editorial control. The Xinhuanet offered photos of almost every nation's parade. For example, only six Chadian athletes had participated in the parade, yet viewers could still easily find the particular photo in Xinhuanet's photo section, whereas none of the Western websites offered this kind of picture. As to the performances of the opening ceremony, websites such as QQ and Sina had quite a few sets of slide shows focusing on a series of performances, be it the scroll unfurling or the Taiji performance. These instances probably reveal that Chinese websites were not narrowing down their picture display to a constrained level and tried to be less selective in order to satisfy needs of a large audience base. Then taking a close examination of captions and titles for Olympic pictures, one may find that there were a fair number of titles and captions sketched in an emotional manner. Titles such as “splendid fireworks”<sup>32</sup> [zhuang li yan huo], “gorgeous opening ceremony” [xuan li de kai mu shi], “amazingly beautiful scene” [ling ren jing tan de mei jing] were common among the Chinese websites.

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<sup>32</sup> The news headlines were translated by the author.



Some even employed more sensational phrases in their captions, for example, “intoxicated” [Sohu: ling ren chen zui], “perfectly displayed the Olympics” [CCTV: wan mei yan yi ao lin pi ke], “pyrotechnics exploded the spirit of Chinese dragon” [Sohu: yan huo yin bao zhong hua long hun], “touch/move the world” [CCTV: gan dong shi jie], “too beautiful to be described” [Sina: mei dao ji dian], etc. Such a subjective or emotive practice is usually avoided by Western mainstream media. However, this was a very prominent feature of Chinese web journalism in the coverage of the 2008 Olympics. Presumably, implicit in this practice was a strong element of “sports nationalism”. This nationalism has already been noted in relation to the overall web design (e.g. the overwhelming use of Chinese red as background, medal table was placed on very prominent places), and will become more obvious in later analysis of news titles and other textual aspects. The exploration on journalistic implications will be expanded on in later discussion.

Drawn from the analysis above, if we argue that a few captions or titles at Chinese websites have played a role of overstating the image, interestingly, TVNZ then can be served as an opposite case in which captions sometimes undercut the image. Captions of TVNZ’s pictures were usually designed in a complete sentence and sparkled with humour when possible. The following are instances from TVNZ’s “pick of the pics”<sup>33</sup>: “A starts gun goes off to signal to the other sprinters that the race for silver behind Usain Bolt has begun”, “US President George W. Bush fulfils his childhood dream of being on the women’s beach volleyball team”, “The raising of the Olympic rings was a precursor of the magic to come in Beijing” and “Soon Michael Phelps will have enough medals to start his own Olympics”. Such a judgment-laden practice is not common within Western mainstream news websites, as mentioned above. It can be viewed as a particular manifestation of sports nationalism. The specific status of New Zealand in the Olympic Games has more or less driven such a practice. Compared with China, the US and the UK, New Zealand was not a strongly competitive nation in Olympics. Therefore, the media in NZ had to add more liveliness to the coverage via humorous and even subjective tactics to arouse viewers’ interest.

In terms of sources used, web portals in China utilized a considerable number of

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<sup>33</sup> Available at: [http://tvnz.co.nz/view/photo\\_gallery\\_popup\\_skin/2028450](http://tvnz.co.nz/view/photo_gallery_popup_skin/2028450) (accessed 24 August 2008).

ceremonial pictures originating from Xinhua Agency; rarely could viewers find any inside-stadium shots taken by online journalists. This suggests that during significant news events, Chinese web portals still principally rely on offline sources, especially the nationwide news agency. This kind of practice may disappoint a few online journalism commentators (e.g. Deuze, 1999, 2003) who define the key trait of online journalism lies in its originality or newness. Such scholars claim that online news contents, no matter in what kind of format, should be produced almost exclusively for presentation and distribution via the web. However, at least in the dimension of ceremonial photos, instead of being the content creator, Chinese web portals were inclined to employ the tactic of adapting existing journalism to online formats. Findings have shown very little evidence of portals' original endeavours. As elaborated in the previous background introduction, the four web portals in China were granted licences and (or) passes to report the Olympics. For example, as the sole Internet Sponsor and Operator of the official website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, Sohu set up a 700-member editorial team to cover the Olympics, among which more than 100 people of the team were granted passes, next only to CCTV and Xinhua News Agency in number. The other three portals, Sina, QQ, and NetEase, had formed a joint Olympic Coverage Alliance, with the aim of providing timely online coverage of the Game. Therefore, it is expected that the following part of studies on audio/video and textual news probably show more web-originated contents.

To sum up, the analysis above suggests that different journalistic logics prevail in journalistic practice on picture utilization at Chinese and Western news websites. In China, the news picture is usually treated as an individual category that constitutes the online news section. The use of images often reflects the level of importance of the news event and the impact of pictures is increasingly invoked as an impetus for compelling the audience's attention. In the West, photos and graphics are largely incorporated as part of news, aiming to depict aspects of stories that verbal texts cannot capture. News images at Western websites have been used as "mirrors of the events" and as "a reflection of the world at large" (Zelizer, 2005: 28). Moreover, the much discussed role of "smooth navigation" (King, 1998; Bardoel, 1996; Kawamoto, 2003, Väliaho and Lundgren, 2005) is less evident in the Chinese cyberspace. The multimedia contents at Chinese websites play a weak role of guiding users' navigation. The assumption that multimedia journalism online is a good way to avoid audiences

getting lost in the sea of information (Bardoel, 1996) seems difficult to tally with the Chinese reality. Quite the contrary, there is an emphasis on making the “sea” bigger by a heavy use of graphical content at Chinese websites.

### 5.2.2 Webcasting the Olympics

As mentioned in the background chapter, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were the first ever Olympic Games to have full digital coverage freely available around the world, with hundreds of millions of viewers follow the audio and video content online. In China, there were nine websites offering a large amount of Olympic video coverage, which is in sharp contrast to the status in the West where there usually is only one online video provider of the Games in each country. The overwhelmingly competitive environment of the Chinese online industry is likely to give rise to a considerably distinctive landscape as to the audio-visual coverage of the 2008 Olympics. The following paragraphs are devoted to a detailed analysis of the distinctive characteristics of the audio-visual coverage at Chinese websites, through a comparison with their Western counterparts. Particular attention is paid to the selection of audio and video content as well as the use of web-generated multimedia content.

Echoing the findings of the photo analysis above, it is shown below that Chinese websites preferred a range of detailed categories in arranging their video subsections, while the Western websites examined here mainly displayed Olympic video content in a more simple way, by sports disciplines. The video subsection at each Chinese website comprised a variety of minor categories. CCTV.com, for example, provided video by disciplines, by channels, as well as by highlights, record-breaking shots, latest events, heroes, beauties, today’s star, interview with champions and so on. Similarly, NetEase classified its video content in various means. In addition to disciplines, live and on-demand video, highlights, interviews, NetEase also categorized video by various rankings, such as the top ten mistakes, the top ten celebrations, most popular by the minute, and most popular in total. Examples of this trend abound and further discussion below elaborates on the point.

In contrast to the Chinese practice, it was rare for Western news websites to possess specific video subsections for the Olympics. These websites usually offered highly

selective video choices for the audience. Partly due to Olympic broadcasting rights restrictions, the press affiliates online, namely, the NYT, the Guardian and the NZHerald, provided very limited video content. For example, the “Inside the Rings” feature at NYT.com, a twice-a-day video report by *The Times*’ Jason Stallman in Beijing, was its sole piece of video content. The Guardian and NZHerald employed a similar strategy, relying on their journalists in Beijing to provide video streams. As the sole rights-holding broadcaster of the Beijing Olympics in the UK, it is surprising that the BBC did not provide a specific video subsection within its in-depth Olympic section. On-demand video was rarely presented alone; rather, a large number of video items, except for the live stream, were shown together with the textual news content. This kind of modest style in displaying video is indeed in line with how the BBC presents graphics, as mentioned above. Multimedia elements were largely employed as part of the news to complement the textual coverage at the BBC. The websites of TVNZ and NBC mainly displayed video streams by disciplines. Within the video subsection, TVNZ offered a few “top sports” for Kiwis, such as athletics, canoeing, cycling, rowing and sailing. Then “all sports” were listed below the “top sports” at the navigational menu.

Despite the growing interest in the originality and newness of digital media (Deuze, 2003; Kawamoto, 2003), the study here finds little web-generated video content in the West. The websites of the three Western broadcasting rights-holders studied here, namely NBC.com, the BBC.com and TVNZ.co.nz, were heavily relied on their television footage. Shovelware and repurposed video content were the most popular strategies for producing video content at the three TV-affiliated websites. The other three Western websites, NYT.com, Guardian.co.uk and NZHerald.co.nz created limited video coverage. As mentioned above, the NYT only had a twice-a-day video report and offered large amounts of audio instead. Similarly, video items offered by the NZHerald were generally few and brief. Though also limited in number, the Guardian’s video streams for the 2008 Olympics were quite creative. For example, when most websites were describing Michael Phelps’ 12,000 calories daily diet in written texts, the Guardian displayed all the food on a table. In the video,<sup>34</sup> Jon Henley of the Guardian tried hard to dine like the Olympic champion. From eagerness

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<sup>34</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/15/foodanddrink.michaelphelps> (accessed 18 August 2008).



to sickness, from horror to despair, the Guardian's video showed how Henley struggled on Phelps' diet. This interesting video became very popular at Games time and was quoted widely online. In the West, it seems that creativity was the key for the success of web-generated video content during these Olympic Games when television was still the main destination for the audience.

Driven by the competitive landscape of the online media industry, Chinese websites seemed to be highly aware of the importance of creativity in relation to web-only video content. As introduced above, the four portal sites in China gained relatively similar or even the same Olympic video content from CCTV.com. In other words, the video coverage of matches, ceremonies and on-spot actions was almost the same as shown on television. Therefore, in order to attract internet users' attention, websites in China produced various original video programmes focusing on interviews. The table below illustrates the web-only interview programmes<sup>35</sup> presented at the Chinese websites under study.

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<sup>35</sup> Names of these programmes were translated by the author.

<i>Name of the website</i>	<i>Name of the interview subsection</i>	<i>Snapshot(s) of the interview subsection</i>	<i>Programmes included in the subsection</i>
Sohu	Sohu Beijing Report		<p>Zhang Chaoyang: Beijing interviews;</p> <p>I am in Beijing, I am at the Stadium;</p> <p>High Fun Olympic;</p> <p>Beijing, I Love You;</p> <p>Sohu Debate.</p>

<p>Tencent, (also known as QQ)</p>	<p>Tencent's No.1 Studio</p>		<p>Gold Moments; Experts Analysis; Chats and Comments; Jian Hong Interviews; Maimai.com; Chief Editors' Forums; Morning Call; Beijing Streets; Stars Watch the Olympic Games; Lively Cheerleaders; Astrology Guess; Beauty's Olympics;</p>
<p>Sina</p>	<p>Sina's Exclusive</p>		<p>The Olympic Guests' Room; Bling Bling Gold medals; Happy Olympics; Picture Analysis by Tang; Beauty's Olympic Night.</p>

<p>NetEase</p>	<p>NetEase Olympic Interviews</p>		<p>The Olympics Worldwide; Foreigners Love China; Online stories of the Olympics.</p>
<p>CCTV</p>	<p>Interviews with Champions</p>		<p>Interviews with Champions; Guests' Room.</p>



<p>Xinhuanet</p>	<p>Xinhua Interviews</p>		<p>Xinhua Interviews</p>
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As shown above, there is a significant amount of web-generated video at the Chinese websites. Compared with the relatively “calm” atmosphere of Olympic video reports in the West, Chinese online media participated in an “Olympic battle” as to video reports.

A good many characteristics manifested through the sub-genre of the web-only interview are quite interesting and deserve further discussion here. To begin with, the interview was often conducted in a much more informal atmosphere than most television interviews. Sohu’s interview with Yao Ming<sup>36</sup> is a good example to demonstrate this point. The interview took place at Yao’s new apartment in Beijing, which was under construction. A number of informal elements that would rarely appear in television interview programmes, such as slippers, T-shirts, as well as alcohol were presented in this video stream. The following is a snippet of the dialogue between the interviewer Zhang<sup>37</sup> and the interviewee Yao:

Y: Sorry about the mess. We’ve just moved in.... Wanna some water?

Z: No, thanks.

Y: Wanna some Mao Tai [a renowned brand of Chinese alcohol]

Z: OK.

Y: Really?

Z: Yes.

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<sup>36</sup> Yao Ming is a member of the Chinese national basketball team and he is currently the tallest player in the NBA. The video is available at: <http://tv.sohu.com/20080829/n259263240.shtml> (accessed 30 August 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Zhang is the CEO of Sohu, as stated in the background chapter. He created and hosted the online programme, “Zhang Chaoyang, Beijing Interviews”, during the 2008 Olympic Games.

The snapshot taken from the video of Sohu's interview with Yao Ming:



The picture shown above is a snapshot taken from the video. The two participants were chatting and having a little bit of alcohol before they sat in the sofa for a relatively interview-like conversation. In the middle of the picture is a cable installer, who was busy working during the entire interview. A majority of interviews from Sohu Beijing Report were conducted in such a casual atmosphere, in which both the interviewer and the interviewee were at ease. Though we must admit that Sohu's interview was the most casual among the six Chinese websites, snapshots of other sites' interviews, as shown in the table above, also revealed a less formal setting compared with most television interviews. The host and interviewees usually wear jeans, T-shirts, or sportswear instead of formal shirts or suits; colourful sofas replace the dark tables that are common in television interviews in China.

Moreover, though created by online journalists, most of the video clips actually borrow from a style reminiscent of "YouTube" or other user generated content. In addition, taking full advantage of the internet's large storage ability, the video coverage online showed a wealth of "raw material" that might be ignored, cut or edited in traditional television programmes. For example, the online video displayed warm-up chats before the interview, follow-up questions posed by the cameraman,

mistake corrections either by the interviewer or the interviewee, phone calls to contact the next interviewee, a noisy background when the interview was conducted on-site, and similar incidental footage. It seems that the online video journalists in China have generally appropriated a “YouTube” style in presenting online interview programmes. The relatively “raw material” or “unedited content” can be seen frequently at Chinese news websites, especially the web portals. The CEO of Sohu proudly claimed it as a useful strategy of impressing viewers with realistic settings and making the audience feel personally on the scene (Zhang, 2008). This differs from the Western journalistic logic, at least in the mainstream sites studied here, that values high quality video content and sees the “YouTube” style as the trait of user generated content. Of course, a possible underlying reason for the Chinese websites employing the “YouTube” approach is because of the shortage of time, equipment and video professionals. With the exception of CCTV.com, all the Chinese websites studied here did not have strong resources in broadcasting. Therefore, it is not surprising to find a handful of journalists’ video productions resembling amateur work. With regard to the technical aspect, shaky footage, insufficient lighting, as well as an inconsistent audio volume were shown in quite a few video clips. As to the interviewers, many appeared to be far from journalistic professionals. For example, some read questions one-by-one from notes; some abruptly interrupted the interviewee; some rarely made any eye contact with interviewees; and some were even too nervous to speak fluently. Detailed instances are described here to make this point clear. The interview with Natalie Coughlin,<sup>38</sup> conducted by Xinhuanet, was kind of abrupt and mechanical. During the interview, when Coughlin happily revealed that she was going to take a long break and get married next April, the interviewer had no response at all. She neither congratulated, nor posed a follow-up question, but instead, moved directly to the next question about idols, according to her notes. Another instance is Sohu’s interview with Guo Jingjing and Wu Minxia,<sup>39</sup> who won gold medals in synchronized women’s

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<sup>38</sup> Natalie Coughlin is an American swimmer, who won one gold, two silver and three bronze at the Beijing Olympics. The interview is available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/olympics/2008-08/21/content\\_9574838.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/olympics/2008-08/21/content_9574838.htm) (accessed 23 August 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Available at: <http://tv.sohu.com/20080820/n259060701.shtml> (accessed 21 August 2008).

three-metre springboard at the Games. Within the 13' 58" long interview, Wu talked for only 50 seconds in total, since a great majority of the questions posed by the interviewer were particularly for Guo. This kind of dramatically imbalanced interview design tends to be far from professional. With the help of the pandemic case study studied in the next chapter, it would be interesting to explore whether such a "YouTube" style lasts long or whether there are changes towards greater professionalism within journalistic video productions.

In addition, a significant number of web-only interview items can only be considered as Olympic-related, as they are largely entertainment-focused. For example, the programme "Astrology guess" at QQ invited experts in astrology as well as scholars of Chinese *Yi Jing*<sup>40</sup> (*The Classic of Changes* or *Book of Changes*) to analyze the personal character of athletes and forecast particular athletes' relationships, marriages and their luck for winning gold. Viewers could even participate in the mini game, "match making", to test whether they were matched with their favourite sports stars. In addition, judging solely by names of another two programmes of QQ, "Lively cheerleaders" and "Beauty's Olympics", one might be able to tell the entertainment orientation of the two programmes. It is noted that besides Olympic champions, celebrities have become the kernel of many online talk shows. Zhang Zilin, the Miss World 2007 and the first Miss World of East Asian origin, had been interviewed by almost every Chinese website studied here, simply because she was an athlete long before. The "No.1 Studio" at QQ had interviews with some 30 entertainment stars, compared with around 29 Olympic champions. As to "Sohu Beijing Report", 33 entertainment celebrities had been interviewed from 1 August to 30 August, which is in sharp contrast to the fact that only three sports stars were included in the interview list. Below are titles for the three athletes' interviews, which also indicate a high entertainment focus.

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<sup>40</sup> *Yi Jing*, also called *Zhouyi*, is one of the oldest of the Chinese classic texts. It centred on the system of cosmology and philosophy that subsequently became intrinsic to Chinese culture. Essential ideas include the dynamic balance of opposites, the evolution of events as a process, and acceptance of the inevitability of changes.

Headlines of the interviews at Sohu:

Sohu's exclusive interview with Yao Ming: basketball-gossip-Olympics-beauty.<sup>41</sup>

Exclusive interview with Guo Jingjing: not to quit diving, not to get married, my boy friend is cute.<sup>42</sup>

Zhang Chaoyang's dialogue with Lang Ping: conflicted while playing versus Chinese team.<sup>43</sup>

Generally speaking, the Olympic interview stage set by Chinese news websites was not only for Olympic topics, but also for hot entertainment subjects. The line between sports and entertainment news coverage tended to become blurred in China when the Olympic Games arrived. As well as marketing-driven factors, the inferior position of portal sites in the hierarchical structure of Chinese media system also greatly contributed to the large amount of celebrity interviewing at web portals. As introduced earlier, Xinhuanet and CCTV had greater resources and exclusive rights to interview Olympic champions first. Therefore, the commercial websites' strategy was to heavily employ celebrity talk shows to draw viewers' attention.

One more aspect that is worth discussing here is the innovative angle of some interview designs online. Two examples illustrate the point. Firstly, two interview programmes created by NetEase, namely, "Foreigners love China" and "Online stories of the Olympics", are quite different from traditional Olympic interviews. By interviewing foreign people who are living in China, the programme of "Foreigners love China" presented lifestyle, China, and the Olympic Games quite differently from a traditional Chinese perspective. The interview with people from various countries, with various backgrounds as well as speaking in either fluent or broken Chinese was not only interesting but also unique among numerous online interview programmes. Secondly, the name of the programme "Online stories of the Olympics" [ao yun wang

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<sup>41</sup> Available at: <http://tv.sohu.com/20080829/n259263240.shtml> (accessed 30 August 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Available at: <http://tv.sohu.com/20080820/n259060701.shtml> (accessed 21 August 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Available at: <http://tv.sohu.com/20080824/n259176669.shtml> (accessed 27 August 2008).

shi] indeed suggested the distinctiveness of the interview content. Well-known bloggers, experts in IT and ICTs, social scholars together with ordinary netizens were invited to talk about hot Olympic issues daily. Netizens' posts, blogs and overall reactions towards the Olympics were the key of the talk show. Sharp topics, intense debates and humorous accounts made this programme highly distinctive. Moreover, some interviews on Sohu's programme "I am in Beijing, I am in the stadium" also offered distinctive perspectives in examining the Olympics. On 15 August 2008, there was a competition between the Chinese women's national volleyball team and the American women's national volleyball team. This competition was quite special to Chinese sports fans because the head coach of the US team is Lang Ping<sup>44</sup>, who is well-known among the Chinese. Coincidentally, during the 2008 Olympics, the head coach of the Chinese women's volleyball team was once Lang's assistant and the two coaches knew each other well. Therefore, the highlight of this competition lay not only in the two pretty close teams but also in the two coaches. Acknowledging the specialness of this match, Sohu's interviewer invited Lang's daughter to watch the competition with him and conducted the interview on-site.<sup>45</sup> The sixteen-year old girl told the interviewer that she was quite conflicted when watching the match: on the one hand, she wished her mother's team would win the match, and on the other hand, she did not want to see the Chinese team lose. Through the conversation between the interviewer and Lang's daughter, this interview articulated the conflicted thoughts of many Chinese viewers: though expecting the Chinese team to win, the victory of the American team was also acceptable as it could still be considered as the pride of China, since the head coach was Lang Ping. Owing to the special angle in covering this match, Sohu's video under the title "Lang Ping's daughter watching the peaceful battle at the stadium, cheering for both teams" was very popular then and gained thousands of comments. As well as NetEase and Sohu, other websites in China also worked out their unique angles in conducting interviews. Xinhuanet and Sina interviewed Yu Qiuyu (a scholar well-known for his historical and cultural exploration

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<sup>44</sup> With the nickname of "Iron Hammer"[tie lang tou] when playing in the Chinese national team in the 1980s, Lang Ping and her teammates became icons of China after winning five world titles in a row.

<sup>45</sup> Available at: <http://tv.sohu.com/20080816/n258914247.shtml> (accessed 16 August 2008).

linking China with the rest of the world) to explore the social and cultural implications of the Olympics. A good many concepts, such as “harmonious communities”, “competitive etiquettes”, “civic virtues”, and “cultural exchange and cooperation” were discussed under the big theme of the Olympics. Additionally, eleven chief editors together with heads of sports departments in the local press were invited to QQ’s interview programme, “The chief editors’ forums”. Making use of editors and senior journalists’ expertise, a variety of Olympic-related issues, such as heroism, commitments, stories behind-the-scenes, proposals on how to train athletes, athletes’ pressures from the media, and so on, were discussed and debated in the programme. In many ways, the web-generated video, especially the interview and talk shows, contributed to the diversity of the Olympic coverage. The significant merit of the web-based media is evident here. As Min (2008) has noticed, the rise of internet media has inevitably challenged the traditional media, such as television; web-based media are able to rapidly deliver hundreds of thousands of programmes to the same person, whereas television is highly restricted in this regard.

The analysis above suggests a distinctive journalistic logic among Chinese online media in the creation of online video programmes. The video journalists online are driven by a “YouTube” fashion that emphasizes an informal atmosphere, relatively less edited material and a heavy orientation towards entertainment content. All of these traits are quite different from traditional television interviews in China that have a particular emphasis on good pictures, consistent volume, prepared questions, well-edited content, and well-organized interview processes. Six lines beginning with “basically”, proclaimed by Sohu’s CEO Zhang, as shown in the picture below, summarized some of the characteristics of the web-generated interview programmes.



Snapshot of Zhang's guidelines on Sohu's programme of "Zhang Chaoyang, Beijing Interviews":



Translated by the author from characters in the picture above:

- Basically dominated by casual chats;
- Basically no outlines for the interview;
- Basically sharp questions;
- Basically different from TV interviews;
- Basically cannot be viewed from traditional media;
- Basically every interviewee possesses a spiritually noble trait.

The six lines above were proposed by Zhang to advertise his online interview programme "Zhang Chaoyang, Beijing Interviews". In the face of the fierce competition of the online market during the 2008 Olympics, internet media organizations in China spared no effort competing in the "Olympian Web War".<sup>46</sup> Sohu's CEO Zhang even appointed himself as the chief reporter and interviewed dozens of celebrities as well as Olympic medalists during the Games time. According to my study, I would suggest the six lines, though not complete, indicated the general fashion of Chinese interview programmes originating on the web. The relatively

<sup>46</sup> As described in "An Olympian Web War in China", *The Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2007, Page B1.

weaker restrictions of cyberspace, the networkable ability and dense storage capacity of the internet media, facilitated features such as sharp questions, casual chats and less edited content.

As well as web-generated video, news websites in China are also very active in utilizing popular television programmes. In cooperation with central and local television stations, the internet-based media organizations were able to display a good many well-known television programmes online. Sina, for example, signed contracts with Hunan television, Phoenix television and Shanghai Dragon television for their Olympic interviews. The three programmes, hosted by Huang Jianxiang (well-known sports commentator in China, formerly of Central China television), Dou Wentao (the famous host of a weekday talk show on Phoenix television), and Yang Lan (host of a signature television talk show “Yang Lan One on One”) respectively, are highly recognized among the Chinese audience. By adopting these popular television interviews, Sina supplemented to its comparatively limited original interviews. Similarly, a variety of Central China television’s representative programmes during the Games, such as “The glory meeting room”, “Good morning, Olympics”, and “Appointments with sports stars”, were used by several news websites.

Furthermore, news websites “remediated” an interesting commentary genre online. Pingshu, a form of entertainment that has lost its former popularity among the younger generation who had grown up with the internet, was revived by a few news websites, including CCTV.com, QQ, Sina, and Xinhuanet. As a traditional art of storytelling, Pingshu emerged as early as the Qing Dynasty and was very popular in the 1980s, when radio was prevailing. Many people, no matter young or old, would stick to the radio when they had time, listening to Pingshu stories, many of which originated from ancient Chinese history. During the Olympics, some news websites (e.g. CCTV, QQ and Sina) used the “Olympic Pingshu” of China Education television, and some (e.g. Xinhuanet) created their own Pingshu programmes to talk about stories of the Olympic Games. As shown in the snapshots below, Pingshu performers often

wear gowns and sit (or stand) behind a table, with a folded fan and a gavel for attracting attention or strengthening the effect of the performance.

Snapshots of Olympic Pingshu programmes at CCTV.com and Xinhuanet:



Owing to the story-telling nature of this kind of art, sometimes in an exaggerated style, the Pingshu programme often contains barbed comments on some heatedly discussed topics. The following is part of an episode of Xinhuanet's Olympic Pingshu series:<sup>47</sup>

A poor performance of a poor soccer team has actually inspired the public's creative interests. An embarrassing Olympic trip eventually brings funny stories. ... One asked: where is this team from? Is it the Chinese men's national soccer team? Yes, absolutely. ... A netizen imitates the television reporter: Hi, everyone, now we are about to broadcast the match of the Chinese men's national soccer team. Please change to another channel immediately. ... Another netizen informs the audience: Please cherish your life and stay away from matches involving the Chinese men's national soccer team. ... A female netizen told this story: one of her female friends had ordered a large iron cage to protect the brand new television at home, in case her husband threw away the television when watching the men's soccer team during the Olympics.

(Xinhuanet, 16 August 2008)

This episode is joking on the poor performance of the Chinese men's national soccer

<sup>47</sup> Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2008-08/16/content\\_9301254.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2008-08/16/content_9301254.htm) (accessed 24 August 2008).

team during the 2008 Games, which had no victories in three games, but several red cards because of kicking or elbowing, plus a supercilious head of the Chinese Football Association. The Pingshu performer has selected a few funny posts from the numerous netizens' posts discussing and criticizing the team's dismal performance, to tell the story and meanwhile to reflect the wide-spread discussion of Chinese netizens. Dare-to-say together with funny and critical views tends to be the marked feature of this commentary genre. Moreover, the Olympic Pingshu can be regarded as a distinctive feature of Chinese web journalism. It is a special commentary genre that reveals a quite different kind of convergence to those discussed in relation to Western mainstream web journalism. Based on Olympic news and netizens' posts, rather than traditionally history-originated stories, and disseminated through the web video, instead of radio or television, the Olympic Pingshu is both a form of cultural convergence and of media convergence. By utilizing humorous language, dramatic storylines, and vivid descriptions, Pingshu performers explain behind-the-scenes stories, hot news topics during the Olympics, connections of various Olympic news stories, as well as historical contexts for particular sports games in an engaging and different way. It is an attempt towards a combination of tradition and modernity. This commentary genre online is, to borrow Jenkins' (2006) term, an instance of "convergence culture where old and new media collide". More precisely, Pingshu is actually an explicit act of "remediation". It is not a completely new medium; rather, it refashions the older medium (radio and television), "while still marking the presence of the older media and therefore maintaining a sense of multiplicity or hypermediacy" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 46). Pingshu "import[s] earlier media in a digital space in order to critique and refashion them", seeking "the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 53). The Pingshu online is easily accepted by the Chinese since it remains dependent on the older medium. It might be used to represent an opposite instance to the panorama, discussed earlier, which incorporates almost nothing of old media and seems only with difficulty to "function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 55).

Much of the above discussion focuses on the commentary genre of web news; the following paragraphs are devoted to the analysis of another important component of the Olympic online video—matches and opening and closing ceremonies. Differences between Chinese and Western websites in this aspect are examined here in four perspectives. Firstly, in sharp contrast to some Western sites' strategy of saving some video for television, Chinese websites saved nothing for traditional media. In the US, even with the abundance of live streams online, one rule remained: hot games were reserved for NBC television on prime time. Games of gymnastics, swimming, diving, volleyball and beach volleyball, as well as track and field were not available on the web. Broadcasting of those games were reserved for NBC television "from 7 p.m. or 8 p.m. Eastern to midnight or beyond, when the audience is at its height and advertisers are paying the most" (Sandomir, 4 August 2008). Popular events, such as Michael Phelps' races and Allyson Felix's sprints were not shown live online and would only be available on-demand later. Additionally, NBC television withheld coverage of the opening ceremony for primetime television. The audience in the US had to endure an almost 12-hour delay to watch the show on television, let alone on the internet. In contrast to NBC's monopoly of Olympic coverage in the US, the Chinese media market allowed for more competitors. CCTV.com was not the sole destination in Chinese cyberspace for Olympic video; several other web-based media also purchased the right to webcast the Games. Consequently, as many as 3,800 hours' live streams were webcast in China, including nearly all key events. Rather than withholding or reserving the video, Chinese websites actually were competing in displaying the video coverage as soon as possible and as much as possible.

Secondly, in terms of commentaries along with matches, NBCOlympics.com might be a special case compared with all the other websites examined here. In contrast to the usual television coverage, the Olympic video available at NBCOlympics.com was not slickly produced or described by network television commentators. Instead, online viewers were able to watch the standard world feed that was sent to all broadcasters.

Unlike NBC though, CCTV did not eschew commentators. Instead, CCTV promised “expert analysis from CCTV’s Olympic media team” (MacManus, 4 August 2008). Probably because of the rights issue and the high workload, the other rights-holder websites in China all employed CCTV’s play-by-play voices and none of them replaced the CCTV commentary of the games. In addition, most Chinese websites offered social-networking features together with the online video (e.g. a synchronous chat box beside the media player), enabling fans to chat with other viewers online while watching the game. This feature will be further analyzed in the following section on interactivity.

Thirdly, for the video-on-demand, Western websites rarely offered captions, whereas caption-provision is a tradition of Chinese video footage, largely owing to the cultural diversity of China. The majority of Chinese television news, interview programmes, television dramas as well as movies have long been accompanied with captions, in consideration of audiences who may have hearing problems, or who may be fluent in dialects, but not familiar with Mandarin, such as Cantonese speakers. Moreover, a number of Olympic video items in Chinese websites were not only equipped with captions, but also summaries of the video, or even full scripts below the video streams. Furthermore, with regard to the issue of downloading the video, it seems that among the twelve websites analyzed here, only NBCOlympics.com allowed certain users to download some of the video. NBC provided a free download service called “Olympics on the Go”, which is sponsored by PC-maker Lenovo and powered by TVTonic. Through the Windows Vista Media Center, internet users were able to download more than 200 hours of television programming over the 17 days of the Olympics, including “approximately 24 sports, the full opening ceremony, and a closing ceremony montage” in “up to HD quality video”.<sup>48</sup> Given the fact that only PC users with the Vista system were enabled to download, I assume that the number of people who actually downloaded the Olympic video might be small. Connected here is the commercial nature of the NBC, which paid roughly \$5.7 billion for

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<sup>48</sup> Available at: [www.nbc.com/olympicsonthego](http://www.nbc.com/olympicsonthego) (accessed 22 August 2008).

exclusive rights from 2000-2012 and would rely on advertisements and sponsorships to cover their costs and make a profit. In contrast, the BBC and CCTV are supported by licence fees and have a public mandate to serve the interests of their viewers.

With regard to webcasting the Olympics, one more aspect that deserves discussion is the audio coverage. Chinese websites offered relatively more audio items, while Western websites seemed to employ the audio content more skillfully. As mentioned above, NYT.com offered comparatively limited video coverage, but provided quite a few audio items instead. Slide shows, interactive graphics as well as textual news were often accompanied with audio. In the UK, via the BBC Sport website, audio commentary from Radio 5 Live was available. Similarly, internet users could listen to Xinhua Olympic Radio Station via Xinhuanet. The four portal sites in China also allied themselves with dozens of central and local radio stations to broadcast their radio programmes via their websites. What I want to emphasize here is Sohu's original video programme "Sports Worldwide" (<http://sports.sohu.com/radio>). Launched in August 2007, one year before the Beijing Olympics, this programme aims at feeding the traditional radio stations with Sohu's original content as well as sometimes exclusive audio reports on worldwide sports. Quite different from many websites' strategies of employing traditional radio programmes, Sohu not only created and distributed its own audio streams through the web, but also supplied more than 30 radio stations with its own audio programmes during the Olympics. Despite the widely used audio content, it is unknown whether the audio stream is popular on the internet platform. In the face of the overwhelming dominance of video streams among numerous websites, except music, other audio content that stands alone, such as news and interviews, seem to be marginalized in cyberspace. Especially when there are increasing broadband internet users around the globe, the question concerning how to skillfully use audio, or how to put the audio into context to make it not just a decoration, but as a useful accessory, becomes acute. The BBC and the NYT can serve as good examples here, while some Chinese websites might be deficient with regard to this aspect. As discussed previously, NYT often utilizes audio to

complement its photo galleries, interactive graphics and textual news. For example, the photo gallery of “The Ceremonies”<sup>49</sup> incorporated picture displays and audio that was voiced by photographers about their experience of shooting the Olympics. The BBC is good at combining video and audio streams within its textual accounts. More detailed analysis of how news websites utilize audio, video and other media forms together will be given in a separate section on multimedia packages.

Generally speaking, websites in China tend to be less interested in exploring audio content further, probably because of the fierce competition over video. Most audio programmes were placed by themselves, with no context at all. At other times audio content was used in ways that might be regarded as inappropriate. For example, the website of CCTV used the Olympic theme song “You and Me” as the background music for its Olympic in-depth section. The song would keep playing again and again when one viewed the page. After examining the site very carefully, I found that there was no way to get rid of the music since the site offered no button to mute the song. The only means was to mute the speaker instead. It is unclear why CCTV employed such an unusual tactic. No matter how beautiful or important the song is, it could be argued that internet users at least should be granted choices of how to listen and when.

To sum up, compared with the relatively “calm” atmosphere of webcasting the Games in the West, Chinese websites under analysis tended to try every means to extensively broadcast the Beijing Olympics. The most-discussed webcasting fashions in web journalism literature, namely, live streams and video-on-demand, or original, repurposed and simulcast, have been heavily used by news websites in China. As a result of the intensively competitive landscape of webcasting the Games, news websites in China have by and large contributed to presenting a multifaceted Olympics to the audience. At the same time, probably because of the fiercely competitive environment of Chinese internet market, much of the original audio and

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<sup>49</sup> Available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/sports/olympics/2008-pictures-of-the-olympics/index.html>  
(accessed 25 August 2008).



video coverage of the Olympics appears to have been produced in haste. Compared with the by and large professional webcasting in the majority of Western websites, much of Chinese audio-visual content seems to have some distance to go to be professional. A “YouTube” style is widely shown within web-only video content that was produced by journalists online.

### 5.2.3 Olympic multimedia news packages

The analysis above examined the “multimediality” of mainstream news websites by deconstructing the concept of “multi-media” into the representational aspects of texts, pictures, audio and video. This stage of analysis focuses on the integration of various multimedia units, including texts, graphics, photos, animations, audio and video. As there is increasing discussion (e.g. Zerba, 2004; Boczkowski, 2004; Thurman and Lupton, 2008) that the concept of “multimedia” has moved toward a more *packaged journalism online* that embraces interactive attributes, my study here explores websites’ utilizations of these multimedia news packages. Particular interest is devoted to how the multimedia package uses multiple senses and multiple platforms to enhance the storytelling as well as to contribute to a “whole new journalism” (Quittner, 1995). The close examination of multimedia news packages on the web reveals at least two main differences between Chinese and the Anglo-American news websites. Firstly, with regard to the aspect of news stories, Chinese websites under analysis have shown a weaker integration of various multimedia elements compared with the Anglo-American counterparts. Secondly, in terms of aspects other than news stories, such as features and commentaries, Chinese websites have shown dramatic interest in analyzing and summarizing the Games with the help of multimedia, whereas Western websites usually incorporated multimedia elements into background or context.

The qualitative analysis here finds that the multimedia news package at Chinese websites contributes little to enhance the storytelling. Chinese websites appeared to provide a large number of hyperlinks or thumbnails of multimedia contents along with

textual news, but few can be considered as constituting the multimedia news package that facilitates a “heightened” multimedia experience for users (Zerba, 2004). Considering the multimedia news on the web, Pete Clifton (head of the BBC News Interactive) strongly emphasized the function of multimedia as a complement to, rather than as repetition of, the written story. He claims that video for the news should be integrated with text and “focused around a particular moment” (in Thurman and Lupton, 2008: 445). Admittedly, such a particular point is not easy to be found and followed. My close examination of Chinese websites discovers rare instances of well-integrated multimedia contents. The multimedia element usually fails to play an effective role in *complementing* the news story. As exemplified in previous analysis, text stories in Chinese websites seldom stood alone; they were *surrounded* by a good many hyperlinks referring to pictures, audio and video. However, much of the multimedia content was not closely related to the main news story. Pictures and video might be relevant to the main story in terms of disciplines, or key figures, but probably not be able to enhance the story to any great extent by adding an extra dimension, providing context or enabling the viewer to see scenes that words cannot describe. In most cases, the multimedia content in Chinese websites was just the replica of news in texts. Some news pieces even looked like transcripts of the video stream and some pictures above the news story were presenting actions irrelevant to the news story. Moreover, the hyperlinks within multimedia content at Chinese websites actively paved the road to other attractive pages, instead of exploring the news in depth or breadth.

In contrast, Western websites under analysis generally showed a tight integration of multimedia components in exploring news stories. The website of the BBC might be a prominent example in this regard. A large number of the BBC news articles were embedded with multimedia elements, such as audio and video clips, pictures and graphics. This embedded model has become a distinctive characteristic of the BBC web news. The majority of news websites studied here placed video links next to the text news and viewers would access the video in a stand-alone player. However, the

BBC employed an embedded flash audio and video, meaning viewers did not have to leave the web page to consume the multimedia content separately. By simply clicking on the “play” button, users could read the textual news while listening to the audio or video, or watch the video while glancing at the text story at times. The embedded model has proved to be a successful trial. Clifton and Herrmann of the BBC News Interactive happily revealed that the previous stand-alone media player had an average take-up rate of 2 percent, while the conversion rate of the embedded flash video leapt to between 25 and 40 percent (in Thurman and Lupton, 2008: 447). Additionally, 85 percent of users responded as preferring Flash to Windows Media (Hermida, 2007). Compared with the BBC, though still being integrated, all the other Western websites examined here had utilized the multimedia package to a somewhat lesser extent. This is in line with Quandt’s (2008) findings that the BBC website is the most obvious one among the sampled websites in the aspect of offering the multimedia elements that contribute to a “whole new journalism”. Quandt attributes this preeminence to the television and radio heritage of the BBC. The website could bring to bear the parent medium’s resources that were drawn from various radio and television studios, while other websites probably needed to produce much of their multimedia content by themselves. It should be noted that the Beijing Olympic Games might be a special case with regard to the multimedia content, since only television affiliated websites among the Western samples were owned Olympic broadcasting rights. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that multimedia utilization is lower within newspaper websites, such as the websites of the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and the *New Zealand Herald* in comparison to the broadcasting company websites of NBC, the BBC and TVNZ. This difference is not evident among the six Chinese websites examined here, since all of them had gained the right to broadcast the 2008 Olympics, as introduced previously.

One more aspect that deserves further discussion here is the use of multimedia for coverage other than hard news, such as feature stories, background information as well as themed subsections. It is interesting to find that Chinese websites have shown

great interest in recapping or analyzing the Games with the help of multimedia, while Western websites usually incorporate multimedia elements into background information. Echoing the cultural celebration of the opening ceremony, a few Chinese websites created virtual scrolls that were full of multimedia elements to recap the 2008 Olympic Games in various dimensions. The snapshot<sup>50</sup> shown below was taken from CCTV's website. The "Multimedia Museum of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games", as CCTV entitled it, contained material on the opening and closing ceremonies, Olympic teams, athletic stars, medal tables, record-breaking moments, daily reports, the torch relay, memories of Beijing, and so on. The background music for the virtual museum was the Olympic theme song "You and Me" (buttons to turn the music "on" and "off" were next to the virtual "hot tea" image at the left bottom). The unfolding scroll presents pictures of daily highlights ranging from the beginning of the torch relay to the closing of the Olympics, although. Many of the multimedia contents are not shown directly on the scroll, but instead, link to the related web pages of CCTV.com. The idea of enclosing various Olympic contents in a multimedia-based museum is quite engaging.

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<sup>50</sup> Available at: <http://sports.cctv.com/special/C22237/13/index.shtml> (accessed 25 August 2008).

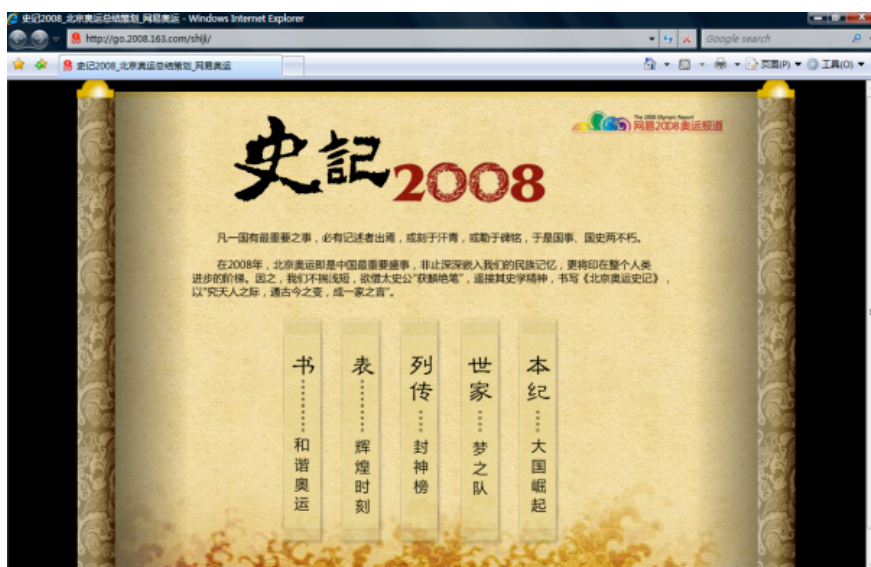
“Multimedia Museum of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games” at CCTV.com:



The website of NetEase also employed a virtual “scroll”<sup>51</sup> to recap the Games. Compared with CCTV’s “museum”, NetEase’s scroll (named as “Shiji 2008”) seems to be better designed and is more genuinely a multimedia package. First of all, instead of linking to related web pages, NetEase presented various multimedia elements, such as video, songs, pictures and tables in an integrated manner directly on the scroll, as shown below.

<sup>51</sup> Available at: <http://go.2008.163.com/shiji> (accessed 25 August 2008).

“Shiji 2008” at NetEase:



More importantly, the short video clips tended to be deliberately selected, usually extending the text by adding a little context or giving an instance, rather than repeating the text besides. Furthermore, NetEase creatively employed the form of famous Chinese traditional literature to review the Games. *Shiji* (also known as *The Records of the Grand Scribe*) was the first universal history of China during the Han Dynasty. The biographical historiography consisted of five chapters: benji (imperial biographies), biao (tables), shu (treatises), shijia (biographies of the feudal houses and eminent persons) and liezhuan (biographies and collective biographies).

NetEase borrowed this structure for its review of the 2008 Olympic Games. The titles of the five parts in NetEase's scroll are exactly the same as in *Shiji*, but they respectively represent biographies of powerful Olympic nations (*benji*), a table of daily highlights (*biao*), treatises of a harmonious Olympics (*shu*), biographies of leading Olympic teams in various disciplines (*shijia*), and biographies of popular athletes in the 2008 Olympics (*liezhuan*). The "scroll" was an innovative attempt towards an attractive multimedia package through the combination of traditional Chinese culture and modern digital elements. It works well in attracting Chinese viewers' attention. Many users commented on the scroll and most appreciated NetEase's effort and creativity. Interestingly, a handful of netizens were quite interested in saving the "scroll" and asked NetEase to offer means for downloading. It should be noted that the traditional "scroll trend" was a particular design feature of the Olympics, especially following the fashion of the opening ceremony. Though appealing, it is not a common practice in Chinese news websites.

In addition to the Olympic summary, Chinese websites also favoured using multimedia packages for themed subsections. Again, largely due to the highly competitive atmosphere of the online market, all the Chinese websites under analysis tried to explore something different to stand out. With the help of multimedia elements, the themed subsections aimed at illustrating the Olympics from various angles or analyzing the Games from a unique dimension. Distinctive characteristics of these multimedia packages included heavy use of edited graphics, humorous content and entertainment-focused design. The topic is mainly oriented at human-interest stories. Xinhuanet's "Olympic stories", Sohu's "If Love" section and Sina's "ET play in the Olympics", as shown below, are a few instances exemplifying this trend.



Human-interest multimedia content:

“Olympic Stories” at Xinhuanet:<sup>52</sup>



“If love” at Sohu:<sup>53</sup>



<sup>52</sup> Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/sports/2008-08/23/content\\_9638832.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/sports/2008-08/23/content_9638832.htm) (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Available at: <http://2008.sohu.com/gloryanddream/s259009107> (accessed 25 August 2008).



“ET play in the Olympics” at Sina:<sup>54</sup>



It is evident from these examples that a tactic of “playfulness” threads through Chinese websites’ use of multimedia packages. Whether the scrolls or the themed sections, all developed in a way that combines both information and entertainment. The literature on “play theory” is applicable here: rather than being just information, mass media content is a form of play for the audience (Ha and James, 1998). With playful appliances within the Chinese cultural context, websites have developed in a play-space to enjoy the “Chineseness” of the Olympics. By offering the multimedia scroll and themed subsections, news websites performed the function of, to borrow Stephenson’s (1967) descriptions, giving people something in common to talk about, so as to foster mutual socialization. In other words, Chinese news websites that were equipped with these playful features contributed to a promotion of mutual socialization in the process of play and hence attracted much attention and gained many clicks. More examples of this trend are presented in the section on interactivity below.

Compared with Chinese websites, the Western counterparts revealed a quite different

<sup>54</sup> Available at: <http://2008.sina.com.cn/focus/6.shtml> (accessed 25 August 2008).

strategy in exploiting the potential of multimedia packages. Most websites under study employed multimedia packages together with interactive devices to facilitate knowledge-building. The website of the *New York Times* is a salient site in this regard. With the help of the internet's multimedia and interactive characteristics, the NYT presented a large amount of interactive multimedia content that assisted in displaying Olympic-related knowledge in a more direct and vivid way. A wide variety of topics were covered, including introductions to the design history of the Olympic torch, interactive maps of Olympic medal winners, techniques on the high bar, tactics on the triathlon course and so on.<sup>55</sup> Various combinations of multimedia elements, such as interactive graphics and audio, animations and slide shows, tables, maps and video, played an effective role in delivering the information as well as making the content much easier to be understood. Though fewer in number than the NYT's multimedia features, other Western websites utilized the multimedia package in similar ways.

To sum up, concerning the use of multimedia news packages, Chinese news websites differed from the Anglo-American counterparts in quite a few dimensions. Chinese websites showed a dominant use of multimedia packages together with playful attributes in the pursuit of drawing viewers' attention. The multimedia package in Chinese websites contributed little to enhance the storytelling, since the integration of various multimedia units was underdeveloped. The multimedia package was, however, creatively explored by Chinese websites in recapping the Games. The combination of traditional Chinese culture and modern digital elements demonstrates an innovative trial towards a rich, intimate and enjoyable multimedia experience for viewers. In the West, mainstream news websites exhibited a much tighter integration of multimedia attributes to enhance the storytelling. Interactive devices were incorporated with multimedia elements to convey a vivid, amplified and easy-to-understand experience for users to comprehend the context or background information as well as Olympic-related knowledge. Differences between the six Chinese websites in the use

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<sup>55</sup> Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/ref/sports/olympics/2008\\_OLYMPICS\\_INTERACTIVES.html](http://www.nytimes.com/ref/sports/olympics/2008_OLYMPICS_INTERACTIVES.html) (accessed 26 August 2008).

of multimedia packages are not strongly evident. In contrast, differences between the six Western websites in terms of employing the multimedia package are observable. The multimedia utilization was significantly higher in broadcasting affiliated websites than that of newspaper websites. The restriction of Olympic broadcasting is a main contributing factor to these differences in the West. Moreover, two prominent news websites, namely, the BBC and the NYT, are respectively leading the fashions of multimedia news convergence and interactive multimedia content online.

### 5.3 Interactivity

As indicated in the literature review, interactivity has been referred to as the main distinguishing characteristic of the online environment and the “hallmark of the digital medium” (Online News Association, 2003). With regard to numerous definitions and approaches that explore the concept of interactivity, a helpful and generally agreed method among scholars (Lee, J. S. 2000; Deuze 2001; Stromer-Galley, 2000, 2004; Chung 2008) is to conceptualize interactivity through the distinction between medium interactivity (also known as user-to-system or content interactivity) and human interactivity (also known as user-to-user interactivity). Echoing this trend, in this study I employed the model of *inactive* and *active* interactivity (Hong et al., 2008: 506) as an overall framework to examine the implementation of interactive features at the mainstream websites under study. On the basis of this framework, I propose to add a dimension of *highly active interactivity* to explain the prevailing offline interactivity enabled by the web-based media in today’s digital era. In terms of the specific components of interactive features, as suggested in the literature review, Heeter’s (1989) six-dimensional model of interactivity is utilized here for its well-defined explication and practical nature. In addition, the aspect of “playfulness” that is advocated by Ha and James (1998) is very helpful for this study and will complement Heeter’s model with this dimension in the study. Below is an outline for the study of interactivity among the in-depth sections under analysis.

## **Framework for the analysis of interactivity**

Inactive interactivity:

1. Complexity of choice
  - The number and variety of Olympic-related contents
  - Widely used interactive devices
2. Effort users must exert
  - Search engines
3. Monitoring information use
  - RSS (Really Simple Syndication or other newsfeed)
  - Customization (weather, topics, headlines)
  - Registering to receive email updates or mobile news alerts
  - Social bookmarking links
  - Most popular (shared, read, watched/listened; greatest hits; in 24 hours, in 7 days; talked about; stories, photos, videos)
4. Responsiveness to users (computer response)
  - Programming instructions
  - Informative error messages
  - Help pages

Active interactivity

1. Responsiveness to users (human response)
  - Feedback mechanism
  - Means of contacting the web editors and journalists
2. Ease of adding information
  - Blogs
  - Twitters
  - Podcasts/vodcasts
  - Discussion forums/comments on news stories

### 3. Playfulness

—Mini-games

Curiosity-arousal devices

### 4. Facilitation of interpersonal communication

—Chat rooms

Other possible devices to foster human interaction

### Highly active interactivity

—Offline human interaction enabled by the web-based media

As indicated in the literature review, it is crucial to bear in mind that there is a significant difference between the availability and the actual function of interactive features on news websites. The presence of the above interactive devices alone does not effectively prove how or if the interactive features function as the literature on interactivity proposes. Thus, various interactive mechanisms are examined on two levels. The first level is to examine what the twelve in-depth sections offer when it comes to the specific interactive features. The aim of this phase of analysis is to identify some crucial differences and probable similarities between Chinese websites and Western websites in terms of interactivity. The next level is to test the actual function of the interactive devices available, since the mere presence of those devices does not necessarily speak to the functionality of interactivity in online journalism. More precisely, this level of analysis is to explore whether the interactive device is well designed for function, or it is only presented as a decoration.

#### 5.3.1 Inactive interactivity

Generally speaking, this study finds that in terms of inactive interactivity, Chinese in-depth news sections online offered fewer functional options than their Western counterparts. Differences between Chinese websites and Western websites in utilizing inactive interactive features are significant. The inactive options utilized by the majority (more than three) of the Chinese in-depth sections studied here were archives,

search engines, ways of adjusting texts and the provision of content for mobile devices. All the Chinese websites under study provided the first two options and only one website (NetEase) did not offer the latter two options. With regard to the Anglo-American in-depth sections under analysis, the widely used (more than three) inactive options are search engines, printable version, opportunities to participate in social websites, RSS, archive and mobile content. All the Western websites studied here provided the first four options; only the NZHerald did not offer the Olympic archive; and apart from NBC and the NZHerald, all the other four websites had the mobile version. Detailed analysis and the implications of the findings are presented below.

### *Complexity of choice*

The study of the complexity of choice examines the quantity and variety of Olympic-related contents and the provision of interactive devices. Heeter (1989) claims that a medium is more interactive if it allows more choice options to the user. Massey and Levy (1999) support Heeter by suggesting that it is vital for the media to maximize the features available in order to create a greater choice in content. While critics overwhelmingly advocate maximizing user choice, it is my concern that there might need to be certain restrictions on the complexity of choice, in order to ensure users not become confused in the face of too many choices. In their effects study on web surfing, Sundar et al. (2003) point out that too many interactive facilities can actually cause the feeling of “being lost” with the result that possible beneficial effects are minimized. Therefore, I assume the complexity of choice should be like a box of chocolates—the variety and taste is the key, rather than the sheer quantity.

My study finds that Chinese in-depth sections provided a dramatically larger number of news choices than the Western Olympic sections, but there are too many overlaps and repetitions of the choice. Then in terms of the use of inactive interactive devices, Chinese websites generally offered fewer options than Western websites studied here. By taking full-screen snapshots on a 1280×800 pixel wide screen, I obtained at least

ten snapshots for each complete front page of Chinese in-depth sections, while I got at most five snapshots when saving any front page of Western in-depth sections. Various forms of news (e.g. in texts, pictures, audio, video or multimedia), commentaries (e.g. blogs, forums, cartoons, interviews, talk shows, etc.), tabular information (e.g. tickets, statistics, profiles, schedules, sitemaps, traffic reports, etc.), search engines (e.g. search by dates, results, disciplines, athletes, venues, keywords, internal or external, etc.), archives (e.g. daily archive of the Beijing Olympics, archive of previous Games, gold medals only, results only, etc.), and entertainment devices (e.g. mini-games, wallpapers, etc.) were available on the front page of in-depth sections in the six Chinese websites under study. However, though the number of options is impressive, the nature and relevance of the choice are questionable. Probably encouraged by the existing literature that equates maximizing user choice with a high level of interactivity, Chinese news websites tend to be more and more crowded. The phenomenon of overlaps or repetitions of choice were quite common at both the front page of in-depth sections and the individual news webpage among the Chinese websites. In contrast, Western websites offered a relatively smaller number of content choices, there was rarely any repetition and the content tended to be not as sensational as in the Chinese ones. In terms of inactive options, Chinese websites provided fewer choices than the Western websites under study. The majority (more than three) of the Chinese websites offered four choices (search engines, archive, adjusting the text and mobile version), while the majority (more than three) of Anglo-American websites offered six choices (search engines, printable versions, participation in social websites, RSS, archive and mobile versions). Search engines, archives and mobile versions were widely used by all of the websites under study. It is interesting to find that Chinese websites paid particular attention to the option of adjusting the text, while they showed little interest in offering links to a printable version, which was underscored by all of the Western websites under analysis. The general lack of a printable version is probably related to the fact that the printer is not prevalent within Chinese household, while a great majority of Chinese netizens (78.4 percent<sup>56</sup>) surf

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<sup>56</sup> According to the CNNIC (2009, January), as of 31 December 2008, 78.4 percent of Chinese netizens

online at home. Detailed analysis on each of the options above is unfolded in the following paragraphs.

*Effort users must exert*

According to Heeter, the user must exert effort in making choice for navigation. Thus, navigational tools, such as search engines, menu bars, and hot links, are useful interactive options that help to involve meaningful effort. Judging from the availability of those navigational devices, all websites under analysis have attached great importance to this aspect. However, there were slight differences between Chinese and Western websites in terms of the specific design option, which might more or less affect the extent of effort users needed to exert. For example, the search engine at Chinese websites was usually complemented with a few “key words” or “most searched words”.

Search engines with “input” beforehand:

Sohu:



Sina:





NetEase:



As shown above, in the search box, Chinese web editors often input words that they consider as the most searched or the most popular to facilitate users' search. This practice has largely reduced users' effort if the words are exactly what they want to search. This kind of effort-saving practice was very popular among Chinese online professionals and is actually a distinctive feature of Chinese news websites. This unique characteristic is closely related to the demographic structure of Chinese netizens and the relatively high effort demanded in typing Chinese characters. As presented in the background chapter, the total number of Chinese netizens was only 8.9 million at the end of 1999. In ten years time, the number had grown to 384 million, with an annual growth rate of 28.9 percent. The rapid growth rate implies that a significant number of Chinese netizens are indeed novice users who might feel more comfortable with the help of more effort-saving devices. Moreover, it is a fact that typing Chinese characters on the computer requires more effort than typing English. In order to type Chinese, one needs to install an input device and to learn proper input methods (e.g. by pronunciation or structure of the characters). Many internet users in China, especially senior users, actually cannot type. Therefore, easing users' effort becomes an important strategy of Chinese websites to attract and maintain users' interest to a large extent in navigation. More instances of the effort-saving practice will be presented in later discussion. However, besides effort-reducing, the search box

with input beforehand might influence users' choice-making of navigation. It is possible that people who can type also rely on the already listed "most searched words". This indeed reflects a few scholars' (e.g. McMillan, 2002) concerns that the more navigational tools a site has, the less effort users exert in finding the information they seek and thus, the lower the level of interactivity on the site. It is also noted that much information at Chinese websites was just a click away since the site was very busy, as elaborated previously. Hence, the most common news reading habit of Chinese netizens might be clicking and browsing, rather than searching and reading. Therefore, based on the theory of users' effort in consuming news, Chinese websites examined here tend to be less interactive than Western websites under study.

#### *Monitoring information use*

The analysis on devices that facilitate users' news consumption suggests that Western websites had employed this interactive feature to a great extent, while Chinese websites were generally deficient in this aspect. As listed below, Anglo-American websites examined here offered a wide range of smart devices (known as Web 2.0) in the aspect of information-monitor and personalization.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication or other newsfeed)


Customization (weather, topics, headlines)

Registration to receive email updates or mobile news alerts

Social bookmarking links

Most popular (shared, read, watched/listened; greatest hits; 24 hours, 7 days; talked about; stories, photos, videos)

The above devices or "most popular" rankings were shown consistently in almost every news web page of Western websites, usually in prominent places. In contrast, Chinese websites seemed not as active as Western websites in offering these "smart options". Compared to the ubiquitous RSS symbol among the 12 Western websites, the RSS symbol was hardly seen at Chinese news websites under study. Though a few

websites, such as Xinhuanet and Sina, had specific RSS subsections for users to download the reader and register the feed, one might surprisingly find that he/she can hardly find the orange symbol “” outside of the RSS subsection. In other words, the RSS feed was only available within RSS subsections specifically designed for RSS users. None of the Chinese websites under analysis offered RSS at the front page of the in-depth section of Beijing Olympics and only NetEase had the RSS symbol on its news web pages. Despite the fact that it has been rapidly growing in popularity in Western cyberspace, RSS was not widely used in Chinese online environment at the time of my study. The term, Really Simple Syndication, unlike the concepts such as blogs and podcasts, had not even gained a generally agreed translation in China. Various Chinese media translated RSS in various ways and most media organizations directly employed the English name RSS, which might become an obstacle for Chinese users to accept the device at first. Another reason for the unpopularity of RSS among Chinese websites is probably related to the popularity of Chinese portal sites. During the 2008 Olympic Games, the four portal sites in China had gained significant online traffic (Nielson, August 2008). As widely noted, a web portal is a site that creates a single point of access to information collected from different sources. As a frequent user of portal sites, one might easily find one’s favourite news section that has already incorporated access to content from across the web and thus might feel it unnecessary to download the RSS reader and to pin down one’s choice. Additionally, as mentioned above, a large number of Chinese internet users are novice, rather than experienced users. For beginners, to download and then to subscribe to RSS feeds sounds much more complicated than to click and browse a portal site. Early in the 2004 Olympics, Xinhuanet initiated RSS services and at the beginning of 2005, Sina launched RSS services and developed its own reader. Some Chinese scholars (e.g. Shi, 2005) had long foreseen a bright future of the RSS in Chinese cyberspace. However, my findings here might disappoint a few optimistic scholars, since the RSS service had not gained the “anticipated” popularity in Chinese cyberspace by the time of the 2008 Olympic Games.

As to dimensions of customization and registering to receive email updates or mobile news alerts, Chinese websites examined here by and large provided such services. However, similarly to their offering of RSS services, the provision of customization and register was available in specific sections. Very few Chinese websites put such services at users' fingertips, as most Western websites do. More precisely, if the user is keen on services of personalization or news alerts, he/she is able to find the related devices; if the user knows little about such services, he/she might hardly notice the provision of the service, since the service was usually invisible in the busy layout of Chinese websites. Social bookmarking links can be found in all of the Western news pages under study, while none of the Chinese websites studied here offered social bookmarking links. Links to a selection of social sharing websites enable users to store, tag, as well as share the story with friends and people with similar interests. The prevailing social bookmarking websites in Anglo-American countries, such as del.icio.us, and Digg, were not popular in China. Though social sharing websites are prevalent in China<sup>57</sup>, the social bookmarking websites are not popular.

The analysis strongly suggests two different journalistic logics. In the West, there are worries of information overload. In a media environment where “the life of public issues is shortened as the publicity process speeds up”, journalistic professionals must adjust to the faster news circulation pattern and provide ways for audiences to avoid being “flooded out by the rising tide of information” (Bardoel, 1996: 286, 291). By offering various personalization services and navigational tools, Western websites give users more control and help them with smooth navigation. In contrast, instead of letting users choose their “Daily Me”, Chinese websites give users a busy webpage full of content choices. Relevant here might be the different cultural values operating in the two contexts—particularly individualism vs. collectivism. As mentioned in the literature review, most Western countries are often characterized by individualism,

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<sup>57</sup> China owned “the world’s largest online social network: QZone”, according to an updated report in 2009 (Chinese only). On February 19, Tencent, one of the portal sites cited in this study, published a statistical article, claiming that more than 200 million people were using QZone as of January 31 2009, surpassing the leading international players such as Facebook (that announced 175 million users as of February 2009) and MySpace.

which emphasizes the unique entity of each person (Hall, 1976; Spence, 1985). The popularity of “Daily Me” services alike seems to be closely related to such an individual cultural value. Whereas, Chinese culture prioritizes collectivism, which calls for a favouring of state or group interests over individual interests and desires (Triandis et al., 1988). A large number of choices might be able to facilitate users seeing what everyone else reads.

The “most popular” rankings tend to be popular around the globe. Every news website examined here, be it English or Chinese, attached great importance to these lists. A significant difference between Western and Chinese websites in presenting the “most popular” ranking lies in the consistency. Whether they were produced in terms of hits, shared stories or read stories, or in terms of stories, pictures or video, Western websites were consistent in terms of using the ranking lists. Every news web page within the website showed the same list at the same or similar place. However, Chinese websites generally showed little consistency in the utilization and presentation of “most popular” rankings. Within the in-depth sections, some web pages provided rankings while some did not. There were no observable rules for the provision or absence of rankings. Moreover, users probably came across various rankings within one website. Categories of the ranking changed according to news sections (e.g. sports, entertainment) and news forms (stories, photos, video). For example, users who were consuming basketball video might find the ranking of the most watched basketball games in the web page, rather than a general list of popular items. Furthermore, the ranking at Chinese websites was sometimes quite ambiguous. A few Chinese websites had a list under the title of “news rankings” (e.g. QQ, Xinhuanet) or “top 10 news” (e.g. Sohu), but it was unclear how the ranking was calculated. In line with previous findings, again here the journalistic logic of comprehensiveness over selection is revealed.

#### *Responsiveness to the user (computer response)*

As indicated in the literature review, the dimension of responsiveness to the user can

be examined in two aspects: both computer and human response to user queries. Responsiveness by programming instructions, informative error messages and help pages belongs to the category of computer response to user queries. Since this aspect mainly relies on users' relatively "inactive" action of clicking and reading, rather than actively typing, I consider the computer response as inactive interactivity. It is impressive that the computer response is generally excellent in all the websites studied, especially in terms of the availability of instruction tips and informative error messages. For example, when one enters nothing in the search engine of the website, the error message (e.g. "please enter at least one keyword or phrase") would pop up. In addition, every website offered search tips along with the search engine, which are helpful for a more specific and successful search. Instances of this trend abound. Given the fact that the 12 websites studied here are leading websites within their own countries and some are even well-known all over the world, clever programming response to users is part of their routine and would not deserve a detailed analysis here.

What deserves attention here is the difference between Chinese and Western websites in the use of help pages. If judging by mere presence of help pages, researchers may safely conclude that every website studied here offered help pages and thus mislead viewers that the level of interactivity considering this aspect is the same among the 12 websites. However, my close examination of each website's help pages reveals a relatively low level of interactivity in Chinese websites concerning this minor aspect. The help page of Xinhuanet<sup>58</sup> mainly focused on a video guide, especially on technical and content issues, while the CCTV.com<sup>59</sup> page mainly focused on video, forum and blog guides, and left other issues largely unexplored. With regard to the four portal sites in China, the help page or detailed FAQs were overwhelmingly focused on digital services other than news, for example, games, BBS, emails, online shopping, and so on. The neglect of a news guide tends to give users an illusion that

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<sup>58</sup> Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2006-02/08/content\\_4152621.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2006-02/08/content_4152621.htm) (accessed 28 August 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Available at: <http://www.cctv.com/program/C15676/14/18/index.shtml> (accessed 28 August 2008).

little help is needed with news-consuming, since news is clearly presented on the site. In fact, the comprehensive FAQs of the online news at Western websites tell a truth that a considerate help page can be very helpful as to online news consuming. All of the Anglo-American websites examined here spare no efforts in satisfying users' demands and queries to as a large extent as possible. The help page informs viewers that the site can be consumed in various means by various people. The website of the BBC for example, provided very comprehensive Sport Help/FAQs<sup>60</sup>, covering issues of general coverage, digital text, audio and video, technical questions, and even information to help with users' projects (e.g. the BBC's editorial guidelines) and to help visually-impaired person to consume the site easier. Similarly, the FAQs<sup>61</sup> at the website of TVNZ was also very detailed and included help for finding programme recipes, updates of website, captions for deaf viewers and so on. The FAQs section<sup>62</sup> of NYT.com had hundreds of questions and answers, which were divided into issues relating to various columns and news products as well as different time ranges (1851-1980; 1981-present). Concerning the rich content of Western help pages and the relatively poor news help pages among Chinese websites, we can conclude that Chinese websites showed a lower interactivity regarding the computer response.

### 5.3.2 Active interactivity

According to the literature, active interactivity refers to interactivity that users actively engage in composing messages and creating content on the internet. In this study, it is examined from four perspectives: human responsiveness, ease of adding information, playfulness and facilitation of online interpersonal communication. My qualitative analysis of the twelve in-depth sections indicates that compared with Western websites, Chinese websites generally show a higher level of active interactivity, or at least a potential for more interactive human communication.

#### *Responsiveness to the user (human response)*

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<sup>60</sup> Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/front\\_page/6470385.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/front_page/6470385.stm) (accessed 28 August 2008).

<sup>61</sup> Available at: <http://tvnz.co.nz/view/page/816460/869419> (accessed 28 August 2008).

<sup>62</sup> Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/membercenter/faq> (accessed 28 August 2008).


Besides the computer response to users, the other aspect concerning the responsiveness to the user is human response. As many media scholars (e.g. Rafaeli, 1988; Heeter, 1989; McMillan, 2000) suggest, the communicative interchange between journalists and users is a more significant aspect with regard to responsiveness to users. It requires users and journalists to be actively involved in the human communication by more than clicking and browsing, thus I consider the human response to users as active interactivity. The availability of feedback mechanism and means of contacting the web editors and journalists is essential in this phase of examination. Generally speaking, my findings on the human response to user queries are not as impressive as the computer response. None of the 12 websites under study offered contact information for individual members of the news team, such as email addresses of editors and journalists. Instead, means for contacting the webmaster, editors in general (e.g. sports editors), and media organizations were provided at the bottom of the website under the title of “contact us”<sup>63</sup>. Usually, after submitting feedback, users could get a standard acknowledgement verifying the receipt of the message. Most websites reminded users that individual response is not guaranteed. This finding might disappoint a number of media theorists who have a high expectation on the interactive communication between news producers and consumers with the help of internet-based media. The finding here is actually in line with findings of many previous empirical studies (e.g. Ha and James 1998; Massey and Levy, 1999; Schultz 2000; Rosenberry, 2005), indicating the absence of means of contact to individual journalists. Admittedly, considering the large audience base of each website, it is practically difficult to fulfil the ideal framework of considerable human response to users’ queries.

However, news websites do promote various alternative means to improve the interactivity between the news producer and news consumer. For example, the BBC encourages users to get involved in editors’ and journalists’ blogs, which is indeed a

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<sup>63</sup> The only exception is the website of NBC Olympics. It only offered means for contacting NBC Olympics regarding privacy issues under the title of “privacy policy” at the bottom of the web page.



highly practical means to get in touch with the news creators nowadays. Then instead of making the “contact us” invitation a tiny hypertext at the bottom of the website, the Guardian chose to make their contact means more noticeable by employing the button . This icon is often placed beside other functional buttons, such as print and clip, and thus it is very easy to spot within the Guardian site. In China, a few news websites offered specific forums for users’ feedbacks to be published on the website, so as to employ the free talent and knowledge of the audience to assist other audience members. For example, the forum<sup>64</sup> at NetEase has become a main location for users’ queries and complaints. Some posts have aroused thousands of replies and the heated discussion via the forum is in fact another significant dimension of active interactivity that will be analyzed in the section of “ease of adding information”. The key point here regarding the site’s responsiveness is that through such a platform, a number of user queries have been solved by other kindly users and the forum works well in terms of employing the free talent of the internet user to assist responsiveness. Another similar instance is the website of CCTV. As analyzed above, CCTV.com had a relatively poor help page in comparison with that of Western websites, but the website of CCTV offered an opportunity for users to post comments on the help page. The help page at CCTV.com is divided into several sections. Below every section, one can find dozens (or even pages full) of comments on various issues under sub-sections, such as topics that are not covered, queries regarding to a particular programme, as well as numerous suggestions. Many queries were solved by other netizens’ replies. More surprisingly, my close examination finds that CCTV.com did reply to quite a few netizens’ queries during the period under investigation by offering additional links and brief explanations. Therefore, the active interactivity concerning the human response to users appears to be relatively high at CCTV.com. Of course, besides useful suggestions and kindly queries, such forums or comment-platforms also risk being filled with snowballing complaints, which the journalists might be displeased to read and reluctant to respond to. However, it is my contention that while timely

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<sup>64</sup> Available at <http://bbs.service.163.com/list/idea.html> (accessed 30 August 2008).

individual response tends to be impractical at the time being, the availability of a forum for users' feedback and comments on an open site at least suggests a potential for a high level of interactivity with regard to the responsiveness.

Furthermore, conducting (or monitoring) synchronous live chat nowadays demonstrates an effective way for online hosts to foster interactive communication between news professionals and news consumers. During the 2008 Olympics, all of the Chinese websites studied here launched live reports, be it in text or video stream. Usually beside or below the live coverage, the website provided a live chat room where users were able to comment, pose questions, and many were lucky enough to have prompt answers from the online host. Many questions were more like a part of a casual chat when viewers watching/reading the live report with friends, for example, "what is the best result in previous games?", "why can't I watch the video?", "when is the final?", and "how many Chinese players will fight in this competition?" The online host in this case actually played a role as a party host—not only organizing and participating in the party but also trying hard to satisfy guests' demands. In the live chat room, the online host was capable of offering accurate answers in time and was patient enough to repeat certain issues time and time again. The positive effect of the online host in the chat room was quite prominent. Besides interest-stimulation, sound chatting order, and more audience participation, the online host was conducive to a more informative discussion inside the chat room. The finding here resembles the assumption of Schultz (1999) that journalistic chat rooms could be guided by moderating hosts and defined topics, in contrast to other chat rooms online that are open to any topic and are often characterized by trivial talk. The supply of accurate and timely information by the journalist has largely increased the chance of a rational discussion. Considering the benefits of such a chat room, I contend employing online hosts to facilitate communication between news producers and consumers symbolizes a relatively high level of human response to users and stands for an effective human interactivity.

### *Ease of adding information*

The Web 2.0 era is claimed as a new era of web-enabled applications built around user-generated or user-manipulated content. Ease of adding information tends to be the essence of this era. Users are no longer only information consumers but also information providers. This dimension of interactivity is measured by the presence and the functionality of blogs, Twitter, podcasts, discussion forums, and other means for users to add information to the website. A few points need to be clarified before entering into the analysis. Firstly, the devices I chose to include in this aspect of analysis are closely related to web journalism. Accordingly, a few Web 2.0 devices, which are important as information-adding tools but not closely linked to journalism, such as wikis and personal home pages, would not be examined in this part of analysis. Secondly, I acknowledge that more active involvement in this aspect of interactivity might exist in other websites such as social network websites, but they are out of the research scope chosen here of mainstream news media, and thus would not be taken into examination. Thirdly, due to the nature of this case study, only features closely related to the Beijing Olympics as well as within the 12 in-depth sections under analysis, would be included in the following analysis.

### **Blogs**

According to O'Reilly, who is amongst the pioneers of Web 2.0 studies, the rise of blogging is "one of the most highly touted features of the Web 2.0 era" (O'Reilly, 2005). At the time of the study, blogging was indeed prominent. A few statistical reports here might be helpful to paint an overall picture of the use of blogs in China. CNNIC (December 2007) reports that one quarter of Chinese internet users write blogs as of November 2007. Among the most frequently used internet services of Chinese netizens, blogs (9.2 percent) were ranked as the third, only after news (38.8 percent) and emailing (11.0 percent), according to the DCCI survey report (2007a). Among all the Web 2.0 services, blogging was the most popular one among Chinese netizens, with as high as 71.9 percent and 74.52 percent of Chinese internet users using this application in 2005 and 2006 respectively (DCCI, 2007a). These reports

indicate the popularity of blogs among Chinese netizens before the Olympics. The 2008 Olympic Games seemed to be a great opportunity for websites advertising their blog platforms and extending the numbers both of bloggers and blog viewers. My findings here reveal that Chinese websites were very active in offering blogging platforms as well as incorporating blogs with other possible relevant online services.

Significant differences between Chinese and Western Olympic blogs are found in terms of blog varieties. Chinese Olympic blogs appear to be more diverse in both content and style than Anglo-American Olympic blogs. The Olympic blog in the six Chinese in-depth sections can be generally divided into four categories: athlete blogs, celebrity blogs, journalist blogs, and netizen blogs. Each category was filled with a good many sub-categories. Under athlete blogs, we can find blogs of gold medalists, previous champions, and coaches. The celebrity blog category included blogs of entertainment celebrities, sponsoring entrepreneurs and social and cultural celebrities. Reporters, editors, television hosts, sports commentators, as well as media organizations as a whole contributed to the journalistic blogs. The grassroots blog comprised blogs written by Olympic volunteers, audience members in Beijing, audience members overseas, as well as particular blogs about babies and beauties. If categorized by style, the Olympic blog in China can be grouped into texts, pictures, cartoons, and video blogs. In contrast, the six Anglo-American websites tend to be comparatively conservative in their use of blogs. The Olympic blog in the six Western websites mainly comprised two types: journalists and athletes. Given the sharp contrast in the number of netizens between China and the Western countries as well as the fact that China was the host nation of the 2008 Olympics, it would be of little value to compare the exact quantity of Olympic blogs between Chinese and the Western sites, but the above discussion does support the fact that Chinese websites have a remarkably larger number and wider variety of Olympic blogs than the Western websites under analysis.

In addition to blog varieties, remarkable differences also exist in terms of the

emphasis in the blogs. Anglo-American websites mainly highlighted journalistic blogs, while Chinese websites most often underscored blogs other than by journalists, such as blogs written by athletes and celebrities. By employing the strategy of “positioning” (one of the genre analysis tactics), I find that journalist blogs were often presented on the front page of Western in-depth sections, while other kinds of blogs were almost invisible from the front page. For example, NYT.com highlighted the Olympic blog “rings”, which solely included journalists’ blogs. The Olympic blog section of the BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/olympics>) also only highlighted blogs from twelve of the BBC Sports’ journalists. Slightly different from the emphasis of Beijing-based journalists’ blogs, the website of the *NZHerald* put the blog written by Auckland-based Chinese journalist Wei Jingjing in a prominent place. The blog “Beijing via Auckland” is about Wei’s personal feelings when watching the Games. To conclude, in the West, the type of blog that played a central role in Olympic blogs was the journalists’ blog, rather than the athlete, celebrity or netizens’ blog. In China, though not strictly, the blog written by athletes and celebrities was most often placed in the most prominent position. Moreover, it is worth noting that Chinese netizens’ blogs were given much attention in the Olympic blog sections. A large number of grassroots blogs were listed on the front page of both the in-depth section and the blog sections of the Chinese websites. Though not positioned on top as often as athlete or celebrity blogs, the ordinary netizen’s blog was highlighted by the sites at times. Blogs written by volunteers, ceremony performers, on-site viewers and other netizens were often quoted by mainstream news coverage, both online and offline. As a blogger excitedly revealed, he/she wrote two blogs daily during the Olympics and was very lucky to have two blogs posted on the front page of Xinhuanet and in the meantime, the two blogs also topped Xinhua’s Olympic blog section.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, Sohu’s top banner slogan of its Olympic blog section showed a strong emphasis on advertising the grassroots blog—“At this moment, history is being written by me”. Similarly, QQ used as its slogan, “Hundreds of millions of Tencent’s bloggers are

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<sup>65</sup> Available at: <http://lymdjtx123.home.news.cn/blog/a/01010009514203D5DF8330E8.html> (accessed 25 August 2008).

witnessing the 2008 Olympics together.” As such, a participatory media space was constructed, which is in sharp contrast to the prevailing assumption in the West that the internet is generally regarded as individual media. People often sit alone in front of the computer screen. But in the Chinese case here, the internet is regarded as having power to bring people together.

The intense competition of web-based media in China might heavily contribute to the wide variety and large quantity of the Olympic blogs. All the Chinese websites under study were actively promoting their blog platforms and encouraging more involvement in the site. Certain Olympic bloggers were considered as unique and important resources for attracting eyeballs together with online traffic. Obtaining these exclusive blogs of famous gold medalists and popular celebrities became a key strategy in the competitive blog market. One of the most representative instances in this regard is around the most talked figure in the 2008 Olympics in China—Liu Xiang. Liu is a Chinese 110-metre hurdler. His 2004 Olympic gold medal is the first in a men’s track and field event for China or any Asian country. As the Guardian (18 August 2008) put it, “no matter how many gold medals the host nation win or how fast Usain Bolt ran in the 100m or how often Beijing is mentioned in the same sentence as Michael Phelps, Liu Xiang had provided China with its seminal moment of these Games”.<sup>66</sup> To people’s great surprise, “China’s great hope” withdrew from the competition at the last moment on 18 August 2008 due to injury. The shock was palpable among Chinese people and discussion of the news was all over the Chinese cyberspace during the Olympics. The blog surprisingly became the main platform for both key news releases and commenting posts concerning this issue. Firstly, Feng Shuyong, vice president of the Chinese Athletics Federation, blogged on the website of QQ at 14:49 on August 19 2008. The blog<sup>67</sup> was Liu’s thank you letter to all the people who cared about him and supported him. This blog was the first direct response from an insider and thus attracted more than 1.35 million clicks and 92,000

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<sup>66</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2008/aug/18/olympics2008.olympicsathletics3> (accessed 19 August 2008).

<sup>67</sup> Available at: <http://blog.qq.com/qzone/622008427/1219128553.htm> (accessed 25 August 2008).

comments as of 25 August 2008. Roughly two hours after QQ's exclusive insider release, CCTV highlighted its reporter Dong Rina's blog. In the blog, the reporter as well as Liu's good friend, revealed details about Liu's status. The blog under the title of "Exclusive exposure of Liu's status before the competition"<sup>68</sup> had gained more than 130,000 clicks and thousands of comments as of 25 August 2008. Finally, the hero of the story appeared on the scene. Liu posted his first update after the withdrawal on his own Sohu blog in the evening (20:14) of August 19 2008. The blog "Please believe me. I'll be back"<sup>69</sup> had gained more than 1.5 million clicks and 26,000 comments as of 25 August 2008. Instead of being interviewed by the media, Liu chose to respond through blogs where his fans could easily comment. This kind of blog scoop was considered as extremely significant to the website and the timely blog or mobile blog update of popular athletes and celebrities were hailed as remarkable highlights of the website.

Distinctive characteristics of the Chinese Olympic blog also lie in a few creative activities. Firstly, websites in China have promoted the concept of "blog quan", which can be interpreted as a blog zone or blog group. Based on similarities between bloggers, such as shared interests, the blog group is a platform for blogs under a certain topic to be posted as soon as an individual blogger updates his or her blog relating to the topic of the zone. Of course, the individual blogger needs to register in the blog zone first. For example, CCTV.com divided its Olympic blog zone according to Olympic disciplines. Fans of different kinds of sports could participate in different blog zones and communicate with other fans. If this kind of blog group is too much like a fans group or fans forum, then Sohu's blog zone might be quite different. Users could participate in grassroots blogging through a so called "city zone". By choosing different city zones, such as Beijing zone, Shanghai zone, users could view and contribute blogs relating to a particular city. Sina had blog zones of both disciplines and cities. It deserves attention that the zone was not created by the website. Rather,

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<sup>68</sup> Available at: <http://blog.cctv.com/html/72/806172-141428.html> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>69</sup> Available at: <http://liuxiang.blog.sohu.com/97650778.html> (accessed 25 August 2008).

ordinary netizens created the zone and become the zone masters. The blog zone becomes a useful platform for exchanges between bloggers. However, in my analysis, the blog zone is far from a sound blogosphere, due to the restriction of websites, which will be analyzed in detail later.

Another creative activity regards the combination of blogs with entertainment devices. Users were able to “play” the blog, rather than solely write or display the blog. Sina, for example, offered five interactive games—wishing bottles, the Olympic tree, competing for seats, cheerleaders, and Olympic navigational modules, as shown below.

Snapshots of interactive games incorporating with blogs:







By filling wishes into virtual bottles, posting stories on the Olympic tree, taking a seat in the virtual stadium, cheering for favourite sports stars and changing the blog module to the Olympic one, users could actually play mini-games. Only registered bloggers of Sina could participate in the five flash-based activities. These games served as part of the communicative means for bloggers. Other Chinese websites under analysis also launched similar virtual activities during the Olympics. This kind of activity is quite popular in Chinese cyberspace. According to my observation, hundreds of thousands of bloggers had participated in the game. The unique demographic structure of Chinese netizens might contribute to the popularity of this kind of virtual activities. As of December 31, 2008, netizens aged 10-19 were the largest user group in the country (35.2 percent) and second was the group aged 20-29 (31.5 percent), according to CNNIC (January 2009). Given that the netizen profile in China is skewed towards teenagers and young adults, Chinese websites often incorporate various entertainment means to attract this large group and thus to reinforce the interactivity. Besides incorporating entertainment elements within the blog, another common strategy employed by all Chinese websites under analysis was to solicit blogs and publish the selected posts on their front pages as well as to set up prize contests for Olympic blogs. This kind of activity attracted numerous contributors and drew much attention in Chinese cyberspace during the Olympics.

One more distinctive feature of Chinese Olympic blog lies in the ubiquitous commercial elements. Websites tried various means to embed advertisements in the hugely popular blog market. For example, as the official internet content sponsor,

Sohu offered Olympic sponsorship blogs, which comprised blogs by sponsoring entrepreneurs, and sponsoring companies. These blogs were more like a company newsletter via the blog platform, advertising Olympic-related products. More noticeably, QQ launched subsections of style blogs, technology blogs, women's blogs and so on. Blogs relating to certain products were shown in the corresponding subsection. For example, in the subsection of style blogs, QQ even invited bloggers to send picture blogs involving a certain brand products and kindly reminded bloggers to avoid presenting other brands in the picture.<sup>70</sup> Other tactics commonly used by Chinese websites include blog title sponsorship, blog module sponsorship and banner advertisements.

Drawn from the analysis above, distinctive features of the use of Olympic blogs in Chinese websites can be summarized as a large number of blogs, diverse varieties of blogs, frequent incorporation within them of entertainment devices, together with highly competitive and commercial elements. It needs to be clarified that some of these significant differences between Chinese and Western news websites, such as the frequent incorporation of entertainment devices and the highly competitive and commercial atmosphere, are likely to be related to the Chinese sites being mostly portals and the Western ones being news organizations. However, it is also likely to be the case that some of the "portal features" are indeed the defining characteristics of the genre of web journalism in China. Though not as prominent as the web portals, the websites of CCTV and Xinhuanet also possessed a handful of similar features. As shown from the analysis above, the commercial and entertainment elements were also frequently incorporated into the two organizations' websites in China.

One more characteristic that is worthwhile mentioning in the blog discussion is the concept of the "blogosphere". It is my contention that the Olympic blogosphere at Chinese websites is restricted when compared with the Anglo-American Olympic blogs, despite the large quantity and wide variety of Chinese blogs. As suggested in

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<sup>70</sup> Available at: <http://luxury.qq.com/crocs.htm> (accessed 12 August 2008).

the literature, the essence of a blogosphere is the interconnection between them and the social network which emerges. The structure of the blogosphere can be seen as a combination of a network of information and a network of people (Newman, 2003). The two kinds of networks are constituted largely through various links. With regard to the links, Kirchhoff et al. contribute the following:

One type of link is commonly found in a list of links to the base URLs of blogs by friends of the blog author, or of other frequently read blog sites, known as a “blogroll”; by equating the base URLs of blogs with their authors, such links thus construct a network of people. The second type of link is constituted by topical links in blog posts themselves, which are comparable to similar topical links found in other Websites. Some interaction links, such as Trackbacks and links in comments, are very specific to blogs, and enhance the network of information as they attach more information to specific blog posts. In their operation, such links can also be seen as constructing a distributed conversation on specific topics, conducted across the blogosphere.

(Kirchhoff et al., 2007: 3-4)

In terms of this link-based model of a blogosphere, Chinese websites tend to be quite weak. Firstly, the use of the first kind of link that helps to enhance the network of people is relatively low in China. As many as 40 percent of bloggers had no links to others’ blogs, according to a survey report focusing on Chinese blog market (CNNIC, December 2007). The second kind of link, which is aimed at facilitating the network of information, appears to be largely unexplored in the Chinese blogosphere. My observation finds that there are few links of trackbacks and links in comments among the Olympic blogs in China. The blog survey conducted by the CNNIC, as mentioned above, might further confirm the unpopularity of the second kind of link. In the report, CNNIC categorizes linking types of bloggers solely based on their blogrolls, such as links to friends, links to celebrities and so on. Though being important to extend the network of information, the second type of links is untouched in the report.

In addition, the highly competitive atmosphere of Chinese websites has restricted the

interconnection of blogs sourced from different platforms. More precisely, blogs based on different Blog Service Providers (BSP) are minimally linked with each other. This phenomenon was especially prominent during the Olympics, since a number of celebrities and athletes were paid to blog on a particular website (by ads on the blog page or other means). In this case, the bloggers were likely to be discouraged to have any links to other bloggers who were not using the same platform. As mentioned earlier, the blog zone appears to be an effective platform for networks of both information and people, but due to the commercial concern, the zone only connects bloggers within the same BSP. Even highly similar zones, for example, the Beijing zone of the Sohu blogs and the Beijing zone of Sina blogs, would have no overlaps at all, since they belong to different BSPs.

Furthermore, with regard to Chinese cyberspace, the penetration of RSS among both BSPs and users is rather low, which affects the construction of a consolidated blogosphere. As discussed earlier, RSS makes it easy to keep track of blog updates and allows for content syndication and integration. Many academic scholars believe that RSS is a crucial technology for the successful expansion of blogs and the dissemination of information within the blogosphere. As I repeatedly contended, the presence of the interactive device does not necessarily speak to the actual level of interactivity. My close examination finds that though all of the six Chinese websites studied here had RSS for their Olympic blogs, the actual function of RSS was surprisingly poor. On some websites, only if he or she is familiar with RSS and looking for it carefully, can the user finally find the device. For example, Xinhuanet placed the icon of RSS 2.0 and Atom 1.0 at a hard-to-notice bottom part of the blog page. Then on the pages of QQ blogs, there is no obvious symbol of RSS, but one can subscribe through the RSS symbol on the web browser, of course, only if one's browser supports such a function. Sina, instead of using the orange symbol, put the Chinese words for "subscribe" on the top, which might easily make users misunderstand this as meaning email or a mobile subscription service. The "RSS" at the website of Sohu might be too different from the norm to be classified as RSS.

When one clicks on the tiny small icon of “RSS” on one of the Sohu blogs, one only gets a web page full of blogs written by the same blogger. The real function of RSS seems to be totally lost. Therefore, my qualitative study indicates that only two (the websites of CCTV and NetEase) out of six Chinese websites under analysis had a prominent and functional RSS service for their Olympic blogs. A survey of bloggers’ use of RSS might be able to paint a clearer picture about this issue. The survey report (CNNIC, December 2007) of the Chinese blog market reveals a low rate of RSS usage among bloggers. Three percent of surveyed bloggers used the web-based aggregator for RSS feeds and only one percent used software, such as the RSS reader, for the feeds.

In contrast to the rather restricted blogosphere in China, Western websites seem to pay particular attention to the construction of an active blogosphere. Both a network of information and a network of people were evident in Western blogs. The devices of blogrolls, trackbacks and links in comments were widely employed. Additionally, all Western websites under analysis highlighted the use of RSS together with other means to facilitate the network development. The Guardian, for instance, offered the “Most talked about” widget, which is based on the popularity of blog articles. It categorizes which articles on the Guardian are the most linked to in the blogosphere and then ranks them by popularity. A significant finding here is the dominance of journalists’ blogs in the West and the low profile of journalists’ blogs in China. Findings strongly indicate that the dominance of journalistic professionals’ blogs together with the influential blogosphere in the West shows strong tendencies towards becoming part of the mainstream of journalism. However, in the Chinese online environment, blogs are highly significant, but more as instances of a new mode of communication than as a direct replacement for existing communication media. The “triumphalist” view (Hewitt, 2005) that blogs will soon displace mainstream media seems far from happening in China.

## **Twitter**

Created in 2006, Twitter is a social network that enables users to write and send short messages known as “tweets”. They are text-based posts of up to 140 characters. In aspects of creating content, formulating a place to obtain information, and synthesizing personal and professional relationships, Twitter is believed to have had an impact on Western journalistic practice and to have penetrated into every phase of delivering information (Dawson, 15 June 2009). There would be value on this study devoting space to an examination of the presence of journalists’ tweets, links to Twitter and other possible connections between the mainstream website and Twitter. However, despite the mushrooming academic discussion, the use rate of Twitter by the twelve mainstream websites under analysis was low. The most observable presence of journalists’ tweets comes from the website of the BBC. The Olympic section of the BBC offered an interactive map<sup>71</sup> on the front page, displaying Olympic venues. Green icons on the map indicate Twitter updates from the BBC Sports journalists in China. The BBC considered Twitter as very useful for reporters when they “have something to say but not enough to warrant a full report or blog post”.<sup>72</sup> The following are three of the BBC Sport journalist Claire Stocks’ tweets:<sup>73</sup>

After a long search, found a big screen that’s showing the ceremony! L:39.9149,116.4441:  
6:41 AM Aug 8th, 2008 from twibble.

At bird’s nest 4 opening ceremony rehearsal. Sworn to secrecy. Look out online/bbc TV news  
later 4 some official sneak preview footage 4:24 AM Aug 5th, 2008 from twibble.

Eating PEKING DUCK outside the IBC. 30 degrees outside,15 inside, L:39.9994,116.3856:  
4:23 AM Aug 4th, 2008 from twibble.

As shown above, Twitter is a useful tool to convey an informal and engaging moment relating to an event. The main function of the BBC journalists’ tweets is to tell what

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<sup>71</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/olympics/7493757.stm> (accessed 17 August 2008).

<sup>72</sup> Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/front\\_page/7433648.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/front_page/7433648.stm) (accessed 14 August 2008).

<sup>73</sup> Available at: [http://twitter.com/bbcsport\\_claire](http://twitter.com/bbcsport_claire) (accessed 10 August 2008).

they are doing or what is going on around them in an informal or personal manner. More interestingly, the BBC Sport journalists at the Olympics used mobile phones with Global Positioning System (GPS) to send Twitter posts, so that the posts would also carry information about where exactly the reporters were. The BBC Sport Interactive head Ben Gallop underscored this kind of tweets as “geo-tagged Twitter streams” (in Andrews’ interview, 14 August 2008). Though innovative, the geo-tag seems too technical for ordinary “followers” to follow where exactly the journalists are (e.g. L:39.9149,116.4441) and viewers might be disappointed at the fact that the information is too limited, as the total number of tweets from Clair during the Beijing Olympics was only eight.

NYT.com and Guardian.co.uk offered the widget “Follow us on Twitter” in a small number of sections of their websites in 2008, but not in the in-depth section of the Beijing Olympics. The Olympic section at the NZHerald, TVNZ, and NBC provided practically no connections to Twitter. In Chinese cyberspace, Twitter was too new to be applied. The translation of Twitter had not been generally agreed upon in China. Some used “tui ke”, interpreted by its English pronunciation, and some translated as “wei bo ke”, based on “micro-blogging”. During the 2008 Olympics, none of the Chinese websites under analysis created any journalists’ tweets or showed any connection to Twitter. Contributing factors to the lack of popularity of Twitter in China are likely to be related mostly to the language barrier and the unshakable status of IMS currently. The disagreement over the translation of Twitter might more or less affect Chinese internet users’ understanding of this device. Then the overwhelming dominance of IMS probably constrained organizations’ interest in exploring Twitter within China, since the two devices are alike to some extent.

As suggested on the editorsweblog.org, the key words of Twitter for journalists and newsrooms are sourcing, publicizing and connecting (Heald, 29 June 2009). In the journalism world, most agree that Twitter is a valuable tool for journalists in finding sources, following breaking news, and promoting their work (Webber, 31 July 2009).

The expected interaction in the field of web journalism would be that “Twitter entries build a community of readers who find their way to longer articles because they are lured by these moment-by-moment observations” (Webber, 31 July 2009). However, the reality in this case failed to fulfil any of the above promises. Drawn from the examination, it can be concluded that despite the ever-increasing academic discussion of Twitter, mainstream websites appear to be conservative in employing this device. Though Twitter is certainly a useful device for the ease of adding information, the only instance from the website of the BBC indeed shows little instrumental interaction through the use of Twitter.

### **Podcasts/vlogs**

The term “podcast” is a portmanteau word that combines the words iPod, a well-known portable media player, and broadcast. It is defined in the *New Oxford American Dictionary* as “a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar programme, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player”. As time passes along, a podcast can be comprised not only of audio but also increasingly of video. Nowadays, it might be more clear to explain the podcast on the basis of three functions: (1) anyone can make one—with a microphone or a video camera and a computer with connection to the web, anyone can make her or his own show, which is publicly available and thus forms a wide variety of podcast; (2) subscriptions—one can subscribe shows and then the special client software known as podcatchers, such as iTunes and Zune, would help automatically downloading new files; (3) gadgetry—one can download a podcast onto a computer as well as to an MP3 player or other portable device (Common Craft, 2008). A backronym actually captures the essence of podcast—Personal On Demand broadCAST. The three functional levels of podcast are very useful to further explore the use of podcasts within mainstream news websites.

The comparative study here reveals significant differences between Chinese podcasts and Anglo-American podcasts during the Olympics. Chinese mainstream websites



emphasized highly amateurs' contributions to podcasts, whereas Anglo-American mainstream websites highly promoted the convenience of podcast for consuming professional media. Based on the functions description above, it can be argued that Chinese Olympic podcasts more actively performed the first function by involving more participants and producing a wide range of podcasts; Anglo-American podcasts more actively carried out the second and third function by offering subscriptions for automatic downloading. Among the six Western websites under analysis, the websites of NBC and the NZHerald did not provide podcasts and the other four websites provided limited audio files. For example, the BBC's podcasts largely relied in its radio programmes, such as Radio 4 and 5 live. The website of TVNZ offered audio of ONE Sport's interviews with New Zealand's sportspeople and commentators. Generally speaking, the content of podcasts at Western websites mainly originated from traditional media. There was little contribution from netizens. Though some websites had launched programmes to encourage netizens' participation, these programmes were not included in the podcast. The BBC, for instance, highlighted an activity called "My Games", which was broadcast live on the BBC World News throughout the Olympics. Each show features panels of people from around the world talking live on television using web cameras. Obviously, the BBC does not consider this show as good as being a podcast. Based on the functional model, mainstream Anglo-American websites seem to be more concerned about whether the programme would attract users to subscribe and pocket it, rather than whether users have participation to some extent.

In comparison with the Western Olympic podcast, Chinese Olympic podcasts at the mainstream websites exhibited several distinctive characteristics. The emergence and development of podcasts are deeply influenced by the social, cultural and economic context in China. A general consensus as to the Chinese translation of "podcast" is *bo* (first tone in pinyin) *ke*, which is quite similar as the translation of "blog", *bo* (second tone in pinyin) *ke*. Partly because of the identical translation, podcasting is understood by the Chinese mostly as video blogging (*vlog*), rather than "personal on demand

broadcasting”. The podcast carries out functions more like a vlog. Users create, share, and comment on audio and video content via the internet, just as they do on blogs. The idea that “anyone can make her or his own show” becomes the essence of podcasting in Chinese cyberspace. Functions of subscription and downloading to portable devices tend not to be that central. This might coincide with the unique demographic statistics of Chinese internet users. The rate of netizens who possess portable players, such as MP3 (39.7 percent) or MP4 (15.8 percent), is not high in China (DCCI, 2007b). In light of the ease of adding information, the podcast at Chinese websites can serve as a good instance of interactivity. The podcast section of Chinese websites was full of netizens’ contributions. Xinhuanet created its Olympic podcast section on August 1, 2008. There were eleven programmes in this section, including “netizens broadcast the Olympics”, “forum moderators broadcast the Olympics”, “humorous Olympics”, “top Olympic songs”, and so on. Internet users’ audio and video contributions have been put on top of the section and highlighted by various rankings. Similarly, Sina launched a competition of Olympic podcasts, with prizes awarded to those judged the best. This activity invited netizens to upload their podcast work under the five colours of the Olympic ring. Netizens choose the color of their podcasts according to topics or cities of their residence and then posted the audio or video accordingly. The podcast-based activity of CCTV.com was entitled “My family’s Olympic Games”, which welcomed family stories relating to the Games. In Chinese cyberspace, podcasts almost equal video blogs in Chinese cyberspace. Thus, the overwhelming number of video content contrasts sharply with the dominant audio files of Western podcasts.

In addition, Chinese websites do not favour services of subscription and download, which are considered as the core of podcasts in the West. Among the six Chinese websites examined here, only CCTV.com put the icon of subscription and MRSS (media RSS) in a noticeable place. However, the website of CCTV required users to register on their site to bookmark, share, subscribe or recommend. Few podcasts were available for downloading in Chinese websites. Admittedly, the Olympic Games is a

special case regarding the use of podcasts. There are many restrictions on re-use of the Olympic video. As introduced in the section above on video use, only a few websites had purchased the right to broadcast the Games and only a very small portion of the 2008 Olympic video could be downloaded, under quite a few conditions (e.g. PC users with the Vista system). Additionally, the download function of podcasts has long been controversial due to rights infringement concerns, which might partly explain the dominance of audio podcasts in the West. To sum up, podcast, as a relatively new interactive feature, has experienced dramatically different applications in different contexts. The findings above support my argument that technological development should be studied within a frame that takes into account social, cultural, and economic factors.

### **Discussion forums/comments on news reports**

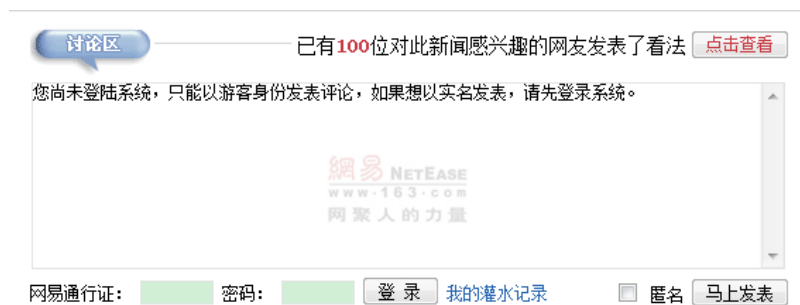
This part of the study focuses on two aspects: (1) the presence and function of discussion forums or comment sections for specific news; and (2) the presence and function of general discussion forums for the 2008 Olympics. It needs to be clarified that the examination of the first aspect is restricted to options of discussing or commenting on hard news, including hard news in texts, pictures, audio and video. Due to the scale of this research, the option for users to comment on news blogs, news columns, news commentaries or opinions is not included in this part of the investigation. The findings suggest that Chinese websites examined here tend to be more active in facilitating users' comments and discussion than Anglo-American websites under analysis. In addition to the already noted features of hierarchical structure, rich content, busy layout, and entertainment elements, Chinese online forums displayed attractive interface and showed diversity in terms of discussion topics. Despite the wide criticism of internet censorship in China, this stage of study reveals the openness of Chinese online forums and suggests that the internet has become an empowering instrument for enabling and facilitating public communication and discourse among Chinese netizens. The following paragraphs are devoted to a detailed analysis of the discussion forums in the twelve in-depth sections.

As to the first aspect, Chinese websites are generally more enthusiastic than Western websites in offering options for users to comment on specific news. Five out of six of the Chinese websites studied here consistently provided obvious links to specific discussion forums for news in texts and video. For news in pictures, especially in high definition or slide shows, websites usually did not offer comment options, for the sake of picture integration. In contrast, three out of the six Anglo-American websites under study only occasionally offered options for commenting on particular news items. Websites of the BBC, the *Guardian* and the *NZHerald* offered links such as “send us your comments/views” beside some news, while the other three websites did not have such quick links for users to comment on the specific news. It remains unclear how the website editors decided which stories to offer comment links for, since the comment option was not consistently shown along with news. An impressive finding is that comments on the *Guardian* were presented on the same page as news, which was rare among mainstream websites. In China, websites occasionally published users’ comments right below the news, but there was no apparent rule or consistent trend for such a practice.

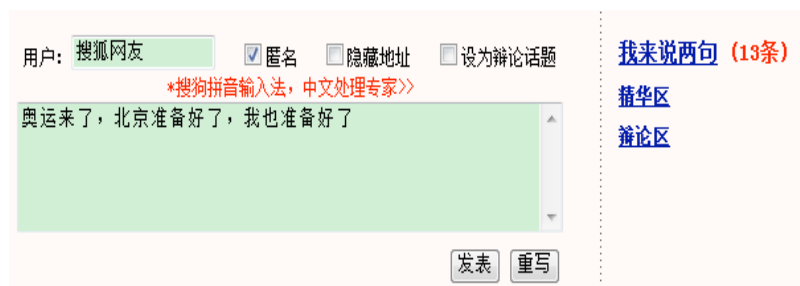
In China, except for the website of CCTV that only provided a general discussion forum, all the websites under analysis placed comment options at obvious places along with the hard news. Usually at the top of the news item, there was a hyperlink for comments and then at the bottom of the news, there was a comment box.

Comment box along with news:

NetEase:



Sohu:



Interesting observations can be made on the design of the comment box. Unlike the Western websites that require users to register and log in to comment, Chinese websites designed the comment box in a way that largely eases users' effort. Though encouraging registration, websites in China did not see registration as a necessity for making a comment. Websites usually supported anonymous comments and comments with any user name and without password. As shown above, NetEase indicates in the messaging box that one could comment anonymously. Then in the default comment box, Sohu has already put "Sohu netizen" as the user name, ticked "anonymity" and even written a few sentences (translated as "The Olympics is here. Beijing is ready. I am ready too.") in the message box for the user. As discussed earlier, this kind of effort-saving practice is a unique feature of Chinese web journalism, which is closely related to the social and cultural structure of Chinese netizens. This design would largely reduce the level of interactivity and weaken the function of commenting if all the user needs to do is to click the submit button. Though there are quite a few posts using the default messages, the good news is that a great majority of posts are written by users, mostly, in anonymity. The most commented upon news during the 2008 Olympics is Liu Xiang's withdrawal from competition on 18 August 2008. Websites launched special sections immediately after the breaking news was released and

hundreds of thousands of comments were posted in a short time. Sina claims that the number of comments on this piece of news reached 250,000 within 24 hours, and QQ claims its special section obtained 600,000 comments on this breaking news.<sup>74</sup> The dramatic statistics here suggest that the networks' forums have become a significantly important platform for public opinion. Various voices, including those expressing support, doubts, blame, sympathy, and respect, are shown in the online forum. Websites provide convenient devices for users to support, oppose and reply to each other's comments. Users can also choose to hide their IP address, propose their posts as debate topics and self-recommend their posts by simply ticking or clicking buttons offered along with the comment box.

In terms of the second aspect, all websites analyzed here provided discussion forums for Olympic fans. Besides the features discussed earlier, such as the hierarchical structure, rich content, busy layout, and entertainment elements, discussion forums in Chinese cyberspace showed, compared with the Western forums, a few previously unexplored features. Firstly, the forums on Chinese websites presented a wide variety of discussion topics. Various angles of discussion were encouraged in the forum. According to their daily rankings, humorous, human-interest and breaking-news-related posts were certainly the most popular ones in the discussion forum, for example, "what kind of Chinese dishes do foreign people like" (CCTV.com), "Funny—the Korean president holds his nation's flag upside down" (Sohu.com), and "Liu Xiang—what we love is you, not the gold medal" (Sina.com). In addition to the above topics, aspects that were rarely covered in the front page news were heatedly discussed via the online forum. In particular, marginalized groups were paid special attention. For example, the most read and commented post on August 9 at Sohu forum was: "On the opening day, she was the most beautiful women".<sup>75</sup> A netizen contributed a story about a cleaner who was busy picking up flags and

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<sup>74</sup> Related reports are available at [http://tech.2008.sina.com.cn/focus/2008\\_sina/index.shtml](http://tech.2008.sina.com.cn/focus/2008_sina/index.shtml) and <http://2008.qq.com/a/20080825/000342.htm> (accessed 24 August 2008).

<sup>75</sup> "The daily hottest post during the Olympics", available at: <http://2008.sohu.com/08club/ayznt> (accessed 25 August 2008).

Olympic stickers that were dropped on the ground by the audience. The story with three pictures aroused much interest and many were involved in the discussion of how to be a cultivated audience member and how to show true love to the Olympics and so on. A popular discussion section at NetEase was “Views of the Olympics from every walk of life”, which comprised views from policemen, taxi drivers, managers of bars, newspaper vendors, and so on. This alternative angle to view the 2008 Olympics helps to show how the Games changed ordinary people’s life. In the face of the overwhelming coverage of gold medalists, QQ created a discussion section in order to greet and show respect to silver medalists. Similarly, Sohu’s “Have you noticed them—the neglected heroes” encouraged netizens’ attention to the Olympic contributors who were not in the limelight, such as the coaches, trial horses, and injured athletes. One post goes: “I searched all over the internet and could not even find a small picture of the Coach Wang Jinfu. I think there are many such heroes who are unknown to the public...”.<sup>76</sup> One more topic that gained thousands of replies and comments within Chinese online forums was the poor Iraqi athletes. Netizens showed deep sympathy to the Iraqi athletes who were wearing torn sportswear and using poor equipments when competing in the Olympics. Numerous posts cheered for them, prayed for them and begged sponsorship for them. It seems that people who are not in the limelight of the traditional media were at times intensely talked about in the online forums. More importantly, a good many popular posts that were contributed by the grassroots soon became adopted by traditional media, which brings about a supply of more news by more and often diversified sources. In a sense, the interactive capacity blurred the sender/receiver roles of journalists and readers: as Schultz (2000) claims, the communication roles become interchangeable. Netizens’ contributions became a part of news sources and thus internet users were able to be much involved in a so-called “participatory journalism” or “grassroots journalism” (Gillmor, 2004).

Secondly, Chinese websites played an important role in facilitating debate and

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<sup>76</sup> “Have you noticed them—the neglected heroes” <http://sports.sohu.com/s2008/0374/s258898473> (accessed 30 August 2008).

discussion. By monitoring the posts, online editors of the forum were able to pick up the popular post promptly and assist the discussion by creating a new section, adding pictures and background information, posting related surveys, highlighting the debate on the front page, and so on. Some websites, mainly the web portals, incorporated design elements of online magazines into forum sections to make them attractive and user-friendly. All of the Chinese websites under study were enthusiastic in facilitating and advertising informative debates. A much discussed topic during the Games was how to view the success of Chinese team in the 2008 Olympics. The online forum played an important role of attracting meaningful debate and thus guided the public to view the success wisely. The question of “what can we learn from the India’s gold?”,<sup>77</sup> posted at QQ’s forum, raised burgeoning discussion on the current sport system in China. The post was based on the fact that India’s sole gold comes from the people while China’s massive success came from the “whole nation training system”,<sup>78</sup> which concentrated the country’s resources on training certain sport talents. Concerns, queries, support as well as harsh criticism relating to the current sport system in China were presented on the forum. Some listed the side effects of the Chinese sport system: athletes are preoccupied with sport training and generally lack other formal education; thousands of athletes who failed to produce good results at national or international level would have serious problems to make a living; and in many cases, even accomplished athletes live in poverty. Some advocated the current sport system and raised the question whether Chinese people would accept the reality if China gained only one medal. Many extended the discussion to other related aspects. Some showed concerns that millions of Chinese students generally lacked physical exercise. Some questioned whether the new stadiums would be properly used after the Olympics. Similar debates also existed in other forums, such as Sina’s “Large sport country or powerful sport country”, “What is the distance?” from CCTV.com, and “Are we really the top one” from Xinhuanet. As indicated in one of QQ’s survey,

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<sup>77</sup> Available at: <http://2008.qq.com/zt/2008/indiagold/index.htm> (accessed 30 August 2008).

<sup>78</sup> The current sport system in China is known as the “three-level” training system or the “whole nation system”, which sees sport talents go from local sport schools to provincial team before reaching the national team if they are both excellent and lucky.



though being proud of the good results of Chinese team, a majority of netizens (53.19 percent) claimed that “we cannot be self-contented, since we still have distance from others”.<sup>79</sup>

The discussion on the adoption of user generated contents by mainstream news websites is connected to the discussion of these forums. It seems that Western mainstream media online are conservative in facilitating users’ contribution and active involvement. Previous empirical studies (e.g. Thurman, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008), as shown in the literature review, have indicated that the legal, technical, commercial, and personnel concerns as well as news room structures, work routines and professional beliefs have contributed to the sluggish adoption of interactive devices facilitating user generated material. The Chinese practice here, however, does not suggest the Chinese cyberspace is free from those dilemmas. As there has long been a censorship tradition, Chinese news websites usually employ a group of staff for information monitoring. Not only politically-sensitive issues (though have got the most attention in the West), but also defamation, personal attacks, stupid statements, hate speech and the like are closely monitored by the professionals. For the Olympics, labour of this kind might be more intensive, as websites had invested a lot in the Games. Moreover, the portal sites in China are well-known for providing platforms for users’ interaction and the online affiliates of traditional media followed such a trend in order to appeal to users. The portal logic that places more value on attraction and less on expertise has largely promoted the flourishing of user generated contents online.

Together with the online forum, the availability of online polls and surveys is also an important and easy-to-use means for opinion publishing, although of course only if the poll or survey is well designed. In the case that it already imposes certain hidden agenda through the form of its questions, the survey itself actually represents no more

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<sup>79</sup> QQ survey, available at [http://vote.qq.com/cgi-bin/survey\\_project\\_stat?pjtlid=15398&rq=yes](http://vote.qq.com/cgi-bin/survey_project_stat?pjtlid=15398&rq=yes) (accessed 29 August 2008).

than a deceptively interactive device. Polls at Chinese websites concerning Liu's withdrawal of the competition serve as an instance that presents an illusion of involving public opinion. Despite much doubt, anger, and blame over the online forum, online polls of the breaking news were designed in a way that ignored negative aspects. Four options of Sina's survey were: "shock and unbelievable; feel pity; cannot tell clearly; and understandable since health is important".<sup>80</sup> The survey designed by NetEase was more unilateral: "you are still a hero; wish you recover soon; support you forever; and look forward to your good results".<sup>81</sup> QQ's choices for "how do you feel Liu Xiang's withdrawal" were: "unbearable; very sad; helpless; and can accept".<sup>82</sup> In the design of the survey towards Liu's abrupt withdrawal, Chinese mainstream websites gave no options of anger or doubt, though many netizens questioned why there was no information about Liu's serious injury earlier, why Liu would withdraw at the last minute and whether his quitting was related to commercial pressure. The findings here are in line with Wu and Weaver's (1997) contention that online polls and surveys are somewhat problematic, because they usually do not meet scientific standards, or fail to be representative. As evident here, the online polls at Chinese websites often give an illusion of participation. The real function of the poll lies largely in igniting and channeling discussion, rather than gauging public opinion.

To sum up, Chinese websites devoted much effort in the convenience and facilitation of user comments and discussion. The Chinese online forum showed openness and diversity in terms of content, and displayed attractive and user-friendly interfaces. The internet, it appears, provided a public platform that did not exist before for generating vigorous discussion. The web-based platform of communication enabled people from all walks of life and all over the world to express their views and exchange opinions. Moreover, the online forum was able to expand the scope of public communication by its speed and reach, as revealed by the above dramatic statistics of user comments. The model of "many producers and massive receivers" (Morris and Ogan, 1996)

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<sup>80</sup> Available at: <http://2008.sina.com.cn/at/2008-08-18/1207224724.shtml> (accessed 19 August 2008).

<sup>81</sup> Available at: <http://2008.163.com/special/00742R2S/hurtlx.html> (accessed 19 August 2008).

<sup>82</sup> Available at: <http://2008.qq.com/zhuanti/liuxiang.htm> (accessed 19 August 2008).

benefits the public communication and leads to instrumental interaction. Furthermore, the online forum offers a viable and alternative channel of information. Compared with the traditional media, the relatively unlimited capacity of the internet enables much more diversified information. The internet may break the information monopoly and provide alternative information that the mainstream media has failed to cover. Groups or issues that are rarely covered in the traditional media, such as marginalized people and the current sport system, were given much space and were highlighted in Chinese cyberspace. More importantly, the popular grassroots discussion online then feed the traditional news coverage. The surging public interest and demand in the online community often attracted mainstream media's attention and resulted in a supply of more information and intense discussion among more Chinese citizens. In this way, the information online is not accessible only to netizens, rather, it has reached a "critical mass". The findings support the claim that the internet created a communication environment in China where "multiple sources of information" have replaced the "single-source news" age of the pre-internet days (Li, 2001). In contrast, Western news websites were much less active in facilitating users' discussion. Users' comments were not likely to become an integral part of the special topic section; rather, the comment remains, as critics have pointed out since the 1990s, an add-on to the "real" news produced by "real" journalists. Journalism online remains to be strictly produced by journalistic professionals.

### **Playfulness**

As indicated in the literature review, I advocate adding the notion playfulness proposed by Ha and James (1998) to Heeter's construct of six dimensions of interactivity. The playful attributes of websites include games and other curiosity-arousal devices. Ha and James define the curiosity devices as those that attract users' attention and entice their participation when using the website. In this case study, the analysis is restricted to games and other interest-arousal devices relevant to the Olympic Games and offered by the twelve in-depth sections cited here. My study finds dramatic contrasts between Chinese and Anglo-American websites in

terms of offering a playful dimension. Among the six Western websites, only the in-depth sections of the BBC and NBC provided a few playful gadgets relating to the Olympics. Based on the 16<sup>th</sup> century Chinese legend *Journey to the West*, the BBC Sport produced a two-minute animation connecting the narrative and the Olympics. The animation tells a story that Monkey, Pigsy and Sandy employed Olympic sports on their Journey to the East, to Beijing. Monkey quiz and mini-games were available on the website. Users could download wallpapers and video onto their mobile phone. The website also encouraged users to download and DIY the Monkey and his friends' masks. NBC's website launched a section called "get in the games", which mainly comprised the official mini-games and sports games from other websites. It seems that Western websites have employed limited playful attributes. In particular, the few games and interest-arousal devices on the website of the BBC and NBC can only be considered as solitary interaction, since no interaction between players achieved through the game.

In contrast to the general neglect of playful attributes among Western websites, Chinese websites paid particular attention to this aspect of interactivity. When examining the playful devices offered by the six in-depth sections, one might be amazed at how creative a website can be. The number and variety of games online are almost able to challenge that of the offline Games. The most common ones were closely related to images of the Olympics, such as jigsaw puzzles, picture quizzes, and wallpapers. Sports flash games and animations or cartoons that introduced stadiums or sports were also popular among the Olympic sections in China. Of particular note is that a great majority of the games and interest-arousal gadgets provided by Chinese websites were network-based and aimed at producing interaction between participants. QQ, for example, made good use of the high penetration of its instant messenger (IM) service among Chinese netizens. An online activity under the name of "online torch relay" attracted a total of 62 million participants to light the torch icon on their IM characters and pass it on to others. It is certainly hard for ordinary people to become torchbearers, but cyberspace helps people to be virtual torchbearers and experience

some involvement. Similar torch-related activities were also held in a few discussion forums on other websites. This kind of easy-to-participate-in games played a role of spreading the Olympic atmosphere to a large audience base, giving people something in common to talk around and thus effectively fostering mutual socialization, as Stephenson (1967) underscores is the function of participatory play.

In order to draw more attention and entice greater participation, all the Chinese websites studied here launched games or competitions that rewarded the winner with good prizes. Competitions varied among different websites, for example, to guess the gold medalist (QQ), to answer a series of Olympic-related questions (Sohu), to upload smiling faces (CCTV.com) and even to be on a particular floor of the discussion forum (Sina). Websites were particularly interested in users' original creations that related to the Olympics, such as music video, athletes' posters, comics and paintings. Competitions of user-generated-content were prevalent among the six Chinese websites. The prizes were indeed attractive, from cars, laptops, digital cameras to athletes and celebrities' pictures and posters. Of course, sponsorship was essential in the prize awarding competitions. Advertisements in various forms were usually embedded into the webpage of competitions.

One more tactic that was employed by websites to draw users' curiosity was the use of sensational and unusual expressions. NetEase, for instance, listed a series of special topic sections under a head of "zhong an zu",<sup>83</sup> which literally means police departments (or units) in charge of severe crimes. This section borrows the name of popular movies (e.g. Jacky Chan, 1993) or television dramas (e.g. *NYPD Blue* in the US), which feature police departments or crime stories. In fact, NetEase's section of "zhong an zu" consisted of picture analysis, topic discussion, Olympic figures, debate, and spoofs [e gao]. Editors played an extended verbal trick in renaming this section. The subsections named above were placed in a setting of a crime story and then became picture investigation, case examination, criminals, PK stage, and prison break

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<sup>83</sup> Available at: <http://2008.163.com/special/00742Q9C/zaz2008.html> (accessed 28 August 2008).

respectively, as shown below.

Snapshots of NetEase's unusual expressions:



picture investigation

case examination

criminals

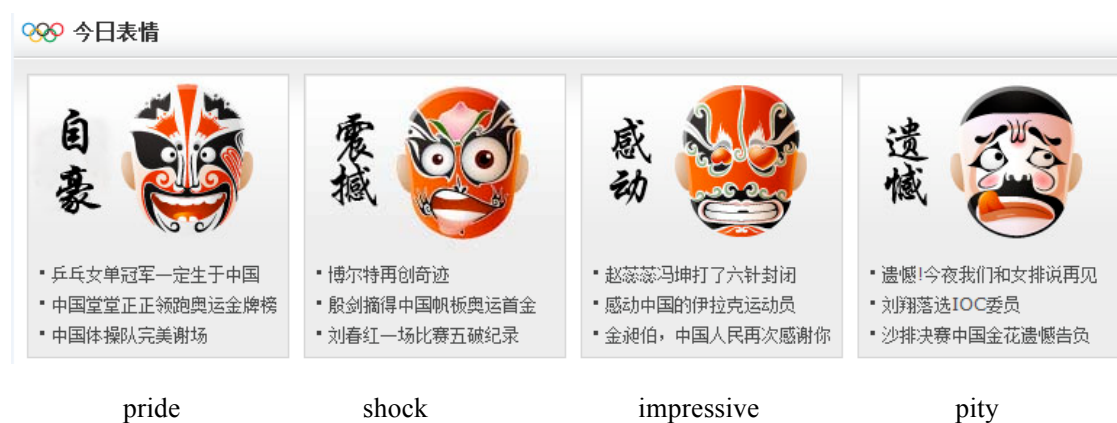
PK stage

prison break

This kind of eyeball-catching tactic was controversial and has actually pushed the “play” beyond safe limits. Though it might be effective to arouse viewers’ curiosity, the practice of putting the Olympic Games in a crime story was obviously inappropriate. Similarly, some websites employed the term “Seven Deadly Sins” [qi zong zui] in news titles, making advantage of the same pronunciation of “sin” [zui] and “the most” [zui] in Chinese. Under the unusual news titles, news stories usually had nothing to do with sins. It seems that the web editors creatively added cultural elements into the web design to attract viewers’ attention, as the tabloid newspaper tradition in the West sometimes does, but such a practice drew not only clicks but also bricks. Han (5 January 2009) harshly criticized websites for employing evil-related terms in Olympic news coverage as evidently inappropriate. It seems that the Olympic case presented the most dramatic web journalistic practice in China that pushed some boundaries. Media organizations saw the Olympics as a valuable chance to showcase the talent of their employees and thus to attract audiences as well as enlarge their online market. The news event offered news organizations an opportunity to test new styles, to embark on technical experimentation and sometimes, even to redefine the rules of journalism, as is noted in the literature (Dayan and Katz, 1992). The analysis above indicates that the Olympics were an opportunity to test and establish boundaries of appropriate web practice.

Of course, there are also good examples of absorbing cultural elements into curiosity-arousal tactics. As shown below, CCTV.com created a section called “today’s expression”,<sup>84</sup> which employed the Beijing opera masks to indicate the main topic of a selection of grassroots contributions. For example, under the mask illustrating pride, we can find articles expressing users’ pride at the success of the Chinese team.

The curiosity-arousal device at CCTV.com:



Other examples in this trend included Sohu’s display of 128 kinds of Olympic lottery tickets and NetEase’s “Shi Ji 2008”. This last example was already analyzed in the section on multimedia above.

To sum up, Chinese websites by and large showed a particular emphasis on the use of games, activities and other curiosity-arousal tactics. Distinctive features of this aspect of interactivity consisted in the broad variety of games and activities, the dominance of “networked play” that involved interaction between participants, and the incorporation of commercial elements and cultural elements into the web page. Within this practice also rose the phenomenon that some websites sacrificed meaning to gain attention, and also attracted criticism, raising questions about the wisdom of these

<sup>84</sup> Available at: <http://2008.cctv.com/50/25/index.shtml> (accessed 28 August 2008).

actions in the longer term. As evident from the large number of participants, the playful attributes of Chinese in-depth sections under study performed functions mentioned in the literature review to a large extent, such as offering an interlude, bringing pleasure, giving people something in common to talk about and fostering mutual socialization. The study can make few observations on how playful devices worked within Western websites, since there were only two instances found here, and those in a relatively plain manner. The analysis strongly suggests that in China the line between serious web use (e.g. news online) and play is less pronounced than in the West. Such a difference can be largely explained in terms of the young age profile of Chinese netizens and the commercial emphasis of mainstream websites in China, as revealed from the discussion above.

### **Facilitation of interpersonal communication**

Human interactivity is widely considered as the highest form of interactivity (Heeter, 1989; Downes and McMillan, 2000). Internet-based media can serve as a useful means to facilitate interpersonal communication. This aspect of interactivity refers to the extent to which a news website could present a channel for users to engage in human to human communication or even synchronous communication with others. It comprises studies of means of contacting editors, message boards, chat rooms and other possible devices that are used by news websites to foster human interaction. Since the analysis of means of contacting online editors has been covered in the previous discussion of “responsiveness” and the discussion forums have been talked about in “ease of adding information”, this section will mainly discuss websites’ efforts to facilitate real-time human communication.

My study of the presence and function of Olympic-related chat rooms suggests that mainstream news websites in the West were generally cautious in offering such channels to the internet user, while Chinese mainstream websites appeared to be more active in providing chat rooms for Olympic-related topics. With regards to the six Anglo-American websites studied here, the online affiliates of broadcasting media



tended to be more open to the provision of chat rooms. The websites of the BBC, NBC and TVNZ offered chat rooms for Olympic fans, with the chat room on the basis of textual communication. As the BBC reminds the user, “the internet is a great place to explore, but the sad fact is that some people do abuse the freedom to cause harm”, the chat room is such a place that may easily involve websites in some legal problems. The three websites paid particular attention to trouble-free chatting and laid down rules for the chat room. Icons of “report” and “flag spoiler” were prominently displayed. Compared with the relatively quiet chat room at Western websites, the chat room at Chinese websites was much busier and showed a few distinctive characteristics.

Resembling the previously noted features, Olympic chat rooms offered by Chinese websites supported various forms of communication under a wide variety of topics. All of the six Chinese websites cited here provided at least text-based chat rooms for Olympic fans. The four portal sites offered online chat rooms via texts and pictures, texts and audio as well as via the web camera. For the text-based chat, users needed to download a plug-in provided by the website. For the video-based chat, users needed to download specific IM software. During the 2008 Olympics, one of the most popular types of chat room was the one associated with the live stream. Sohu claims that on the day when Liu Xiang withdrew from the Game, there were around 300,000 netizens simultaneously chatting in hundreds of chat rooms offered by Sohu.<sup>85</sup> Other websites also actively provided such platforms for communication among users. As of 31 August 2008, the in-depth section of QQ provided more than 25,000 Olympic-related chat rooms. The chat room could be divided by topic, into discussion of sports items, opening and closing ceremonies, Olympic songs, love stories, Olympic babies, and so on. By place, it could be divided by cities, such as the Beijing room, Wuhan room, etc., so that users could communicate with people within the same city.

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<sup>85</sup> Available at: <http://info.chinaren.com/html/2009-05/26193.html> (accessed 29 June 2009).

Influenced by the high penetration of the instant messenger (IM) utilization in China, the chat room offered by mainstream news websites strongly relied on the model of IM. According to CNNIC (January 2009), the use rate of instant messaging was as high as 75.3 percent at the end of 2008. Chinese netizens are generally familiar with IM, especially Tencent's QQ, which is widely noted as a useful and user-friendly tool for interpersonal communication, in either text, or video chat. As introduced in the background information, there were 341.9 million active QQ accounts as of the end of June 2008. This is 50 percent more than the number of internet users then in China and the size of the US population. It is possible that some users owned two or more QQ accounts, but the dramatic statistics nevertheless testify to QQ's huge popularity in China. This high penetration of QQ users gives the company Tencent an upper hand to some extent in the intense online market competition. As Tencent claims, the Olympic breaking news it offered could reach millions of users' desktop within seconds with the help of the IM model. Other websites made use of the Olympic event to promote their own messengers, for example, Sina's UC (derived from "you see, you say"), Sohu's Panel [xiao zhi tiao] and NetEase's POPO [pao pao]. The video chat usually requires users to use the IM. A significant benefit of the IM model as to the website lies in its "stickiness". Once logged in, users can have easy access to chat rooms, blogs, discussion forums and other virtual community as well as news websites, since the desktop device IM offers almost all of this at users' fingertips. Of course, everything offered by a specific IM is constrained within the IM provider site. In this way, the website creates a stage so that users tend to stay on a specific website for a long period of time, thus effectively increasing the website's stickiness to users.

In my opinion, the synchronous human communication via the internet platform is a crucial part of the human interactivity. In addition, Chinese websites were also in favour of facilitating face-to-face communication through offline activities, which I consider as a highly active interactivity, as elaborated below.

### 5.3.3 Highly active interactivity

On the basis of Hong et al.'s model of inactive and active interactivity, I propose to add a further category of *highly active interactivity* to explain the rising offline human interaction enabled by the web-based media in today's digital era. This aspect refers to websites' efforts at enabling users' online interaction to have consequences on offline activities as well as websites' endeavours to create opportunities for users to have interpersonal communication not only in the virtual community, but also in their offline activities. Drawn from my comparative analysis, the highly active interactivity tends to be a characteristic only seen in the Chinese mainstream news websites; such a practice was rarely seen in Anglo-American websites under study.

During the 2008 Olympic Games, the web-based media in China showed a particular enthusiasm in organizing a series of Olympic-related activities to attract netizens' active participation. Quite a few of the online activities fostered a deep interaction that had a definite impact on Chinese society. For example, NetEase launched a series of "missions impossible". These missions were totally dependent on netizens' participation to be accomplished. The series comprised "2008 the route of peace—no country left out", "42459—more than the Olympics", "Stars without medals", "Bei Chuan in pictures", and "He's coming to watch the Olympic Games".<sup>86</sup> The five missions respectively aimed at attracting messages of peace from every country around the world (195 in total), inviting sports-related pictures taken from every village and town in China (42,459 in total), welcoming stars that had no medals, picturing the 2008 earthquake area (Bei Chuan) with netizens' old photos, and supporting an ordinary migrant worker to watch a game at the stadium. The five activities drew the attention of many netizens and the third and the fifth missions were fully achieved by the due day. The other three missions were almost completed, with a completion rate of 99 percent, 98 percent and 89 percent respectively. Noticeably, the five activities were aimed at engaging meaningful human interactions by drawing

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<sup>86</sup> Available at: <http://go.2008.163.com>, <http://go.2008.163.com/city>, <http://go.2008.163.com/star>, <http://go.2008.163.com/beichuan>, <http://go.2008.163.com/see2008> (accessed 31 August 2008).

social attention to world peace and to marginalized districts and groups. For example, the last mission aimed at supporting an ordinary worker, Leng Bao, to realize his dream of watching a game at the stadium.

The hero in the mission of “He’s coming to watch the Olympic Games” at Netease:



Leng Bao

As shown above, Leng was one of the ordinary migrant workers who had contributed to the construction of the Bird’s Nest stadium. NetEase divided the mission into ten tasks, such as taking care of transport fees, accommodation costs, a ticket for the game and so on. NetEase called for ten people to undertake the ten tasks, while more than 11,000 netizens were enlisted to help Leng realizing his dream. With the assistance of kind netizens, Leng finally made his trip to Beijing from his hometown and watched a track competition at the stadium. A good many traditional media, such as the Xinhua Agency, *The China Youth Daily*, and Qinghai Television, followed Leng’s story and reported his unusual trip. These web-generated activities aspired to engage audiences in much more than online interactivity; they were designed to inspire audiences to think of others, to reflect the integration of the virtual world and reality and to have an impact on social well-being. The news websites here employed a strategy of combining public service with the pleasure of the spectacle, gaining both in reputation and online traffic to the site.

The other aspect of the highly active interactivity lies in offline activities organized by web-based media. Chinese websites studied here favoured organizing or facilitating offline activities, which enabled netizens to have face-to-face communication in real life. Examples of this trend abound. QQ invited netizens to participate in a wide

variety of sports activities, as shown in the snapshot below. NetEase launched a national university competition for the 2008 Olympic Games webpage design.<sup>87</sup> This competition offered an opportunity for university students to cover the Olympic events: 175 universities nationwide took part in the competition. The goal was to devise a creative, attractive and practical way of constructing the webpage, with professional judges brought in to award the prize of half a million yuan. This activity attracted a large number of university students' interest, who participated in the activity both online and offline. Some supported, cheered, and commented on the team through emails and discussion forums; some even met the contestants on campus to give advice to them.

Snapshots of offline activities facilitated by web-based media:

QQ's offline activity:



NetEase's competition:



<sup>87</sup> Available at: <http://2008.163.com/isee> (accessed 30 August 2008).

The above examples suggest that the web-based media have played a positive role in fostering a highly active interactivity. Some activities draw social attention to the marginalized; some contribute to an increasing interest in sports and Olympics; and some inspire creativity among the young generation. The highly active interactivity tends to be a distinctive feature of Chinese Olympic in-depth sections. The mixing of genres here indeed celebrates the power of the internet to engage users' active participation. It should be noted that this kind of "highly interactive" activity is neither unique to the Chinese media environment, nor to internet media. Many Western traditional media had similar activities that can be considered as highly active interactivity. For example, the audience can vote for stars (via phone-ins or short messages on cellphones) when watching television competitions and tabloid newspapers in Britain have often organized campaigns to change laws. However, for the Olympic coverage online, there were only very rare instances on Western mainstream websites' effort of this trend.

Such differences between Chinese and Western mainstream news websites can be mainly explained in terms of the following aspects. Firstly, the proliferation of offline activities that were enabled by news websites could be largely driven by the Olympic national spirit that swept China in the lead-up to the Games. It echoes the earlier assumption that the Olympics case is likely to witness the more dramatic journalistic practice online, since the 2008 Olympic Games was a significantly important event to the Chinese. It is necessary to examine whether the feature of highly active interactivity existed elsewhere. The second case study may be helpful in this regard. Secondly, these offline activities were mostly launched and sponsored by portal sites, with the main purpose of strengthening these relatively young brands' identities. The online affiliates of media organizations seem to be less interested in such a practice. Therefore, it might shed some light on the absence of such a feature within the Western mainstream websites under study. The web news genre in China that comprises both portal sites and online affiliates of traditional media contrasts sharply

with the web news genre in the West that largely comprises media organizations alone. Such a difference in nature greatly contributes to the differences in employing the highly interactive strategy.

#### 5.3.4 Summary and implications

The study on the interactive features of the twelve in-depth sections supports my contention that Chinese web journalism has developed in a way that differs from the Anglo-American web journalism, and in a way that owes much to the different economic, social and cultural contexts. Many distinctive characteristics of the Chinese news websites are evident through the comparative analysis. In terms of the inactive interactivity, Chinese websites provided fewer functional devices than Western websites under study and the most widely used inactive options are quite different between Chinese and Western websites. While among the most popular devices in the West, RSS and social bookmarking have not gained much popularity in Chinese cyberspace. It is also interesting to find that when Western websites paid attention to the effort users must exert, Chinese websites were applying strategies to ease users' effort to a large extent. In terms of the active interactivity, Chinese websites tended to be more enthusiastic than Western websites in facilitating human communication. Compared with their Western counterparts, the online chat rooms, Olympic blogs and discussion forums in Chinese websites have been shown to be larger in size, more diverse in contents, and equipped with more playful as well as more commercial attributes. Podcasting has been applied in completely different ways in China and the West. Chinese websites emphasized amateur contributions to podcasts, whereas Western websites underscored the convenience of podcasts to listen to or to watch professionally made content. Despite the widening academic discussion of Twitter, all of the mainstream websites studied here were conservative in employing Twitter. The highly active interactivity is a feature seen only in the Chinese websites. By organizing or sponsoring netizens' offline activities, Chinese websites showed an increasing interest in providing opportunities for netizens to have face-to-face communication. Generally speaking, the interactivity in Chinese websites can be seen

in a business setting as the “combination of rich content, active intelligence, collaborative communications to create a compelling consumer experience” (Robb et al., 1997: 5).

To summarize, my study here suggests that to divide interactive features into inactive, active and highly active is a very helpful means to conduct the comparative analysis of websites originated from different social and cultural contexts. The study finds that Chinese mainstream websites are less likely to utilize inactive interactivity features, while more likely to employ active and highly active interactivity features than Anglo-American websites. I would argue that it is easy to draw misleading conclusions from comparative research if the interactive features have not been classified in ways that are broad enough. For example, though some researchers have claimed that the Korean online newspaper is less likely to use interactive features than the US online newspaper, these studies, such as Cho and Cheon (2003), may only be studying what this study terms “inactive” interactivity features. Their content analysis found Korean online newspapers used fewer options, such as hyperlinks and search functions, than US counterparts, a finding that is similar to my findings here. However, this should be just part of the interactivity analysis. The result of my qualitative study of active interactivity features is in line with the content analysis conducted by Hong et al. (2008) who proposed the active-and-inactive model. By comparing the Korean online newspaper with the American online newspaper, Hong et al. conclude that: “Korean online newspapers are more actively involved in networking or maintaining online users’ relationships using active interactivity content such as discussion forums, chat rooms and communities” (2008: 509). My study here suggests a similar trend of how Chinese mainstream news websites employ the active interactivity devices. Moreover, I propose to add highly active interactivity to describe an emerging trend of Chinese websites’ effort in facilitating offline activities. The findings on active and highly active interactivity features of Chinese websites indeed lend credence to Tai’s argument that “although the Internet serves for most of its users and on many occasions as a venue for information, much of its



transformative power lies in its ability to act as a social space where people gather, interact, gossip, banter, play games, and do many more things that groups do” (2006: 165).

The specific contributing factors to various distinctive features of Chinese websites have been explored in discussion above. More generally, Hall’s *Beyond culture* (1976) is useful to shed light on implications of the differences in interactivity between Chinese (or Korean) and some Western (e.g. American) websites. According to Hall, people in collectivistic culture (e.g. China, Korea) are more likely than those in non-collectivistic culture (e.g. Anglo-American countries) to pay attention to the importance of personal relationships and to build and maintain those relationships between and among members. This cultural perspective might support the findings that differences in the use of interactivity features are encouraged by culturally different communication surroundings. The results here also lend support to Williams’ (1958) attempt to place technological innovation in a historical context and to relate cultural innovation to technological and economic developments. My findings reveal that, to an increasing extent, technological innovation is driven by cultural developments and of course, the computer-mediated communication also creates new demands for technological revolutions. In a word, the relationship between technology and culture is always reciprocal, at least in the field of web journalism.

## 5.4 Hypertextuality

Three dimensions that were regarded as central in online journalism studies were drawn from the literature concerning the role of hypertextuality in web journalism, namely context-provision, a non-linear approach and different uses of internal and external hyperlinks. Ideally, the utilization of hypertextuality at news websites would facilitate completeness and context of news stories (Kawamoto, 1998; Pavlik, 2001), enable a non-linear and dynamic approach of news display and processing (Mittra and Cohen, 1999; Hall, 2001), and open up new contents via external links (Deuze, 2001).

The literature suggests that the purpose of hyperlinks and hypertexts, either internal or external, is to facilitate different kinds of digital convergence, and different levels of depth. This phase of analysis examines the use of hypertextuality of mainstream news websites in two areas—the front page of the in-depth sections and the texts of news stories within the in-depth sections. The study here excludes examination of hyperlinks that are purely navigational (e.g. navigational menus, next page links, buttons for print, RSS, and the like) and popular news rankings (e.g. the most read), since they have been covered in the section on interactivity. Links to advertisements were excluded from the content analysis, as the nature of this study is journalism-centered, but the ads links would be discussed qualitatively at the end of the analysis. Particular attention has been devoted to the differences between Chinese news websites and Anglo-American news websites in exploring the hypertextual attributes of the web.

#### 5.4.1 Analysis of the front page of in-depth sections

The study here finds that the front page of the in-depth Olympic sections at Chinese websites had far more internal hyperlinks than their Western counterparts. The following is an approximate figure counted on 24 August 2008—the last day of the Summer Olympic Games.

Approximate number of internal hyperlinks at the front page of Olympic in-depth sections.<sup>88</sup>

New York Times	72	Xinhuanet	712
Guardian	83	CCTV	326
NZHerald	93	Sohu	851
NBC	55	Sina	1027
BBC	139	Tencent (QQ)	309
TVNZ	37	NetEase	663

<sup>88</sup> These figures are estimates, because of the difficulty of counting links in highly busy websites, such as the Chinese portal sites. The contrast between Chinese and Western numbers nevertheless is clear.

Excluding ads links, navigational icons, and popular news rankings, all other hyperlinks were counted, including both internal and external links. The table above shows that a majority of Chinese websites under analysis possessed more than six hundred hyperlinks, while most Western websites contained under one hundred hyperlinks. The number of Chinese hyperlinks at least triples the number of Western hyperlinks. By comparing the Chinese site that has the most hyperlinks and the Western site that has the most hyperlinks among websites under study, we find that the number of hyperlinks in the front page of the Sina section is about ten times the number of the BBC's in-depth section. Since the size of the front page of the in-depth section did not vary dramatically along the 17 Olympic days, the number above should be typical indicators. To count in another way, if taking full-screen snapshots on a 1280×800 pixel wide screen, one can obtain at least ten snapshots for each complete front page of the Chinese in-depth sections, while at most five snapshots when saving any front page of the Western in-depth sections. Chinese in-depth sections generally had a much longer front page than the Western counterparts. The numerous hyperlinks at Chinese sites played an active role of “providing information about information” (Deuze, 1999). Confirming Fredin's (1997) supposition, the practice of Chinese journalistic professionals becomes less one of selection and more one of analytical structuring of the widest possible range of information. Various forms of news, commentaries, information, search engines, archives, and entertainment devices are presented as hyperlinks on the front page of in-depth sections in the six Chinese websites under study.

The divergence presented above can be largely explained in terms of different journalistic values. Chinese websites emphasize comprehensiveness and are less selective about news content, while Western websites value the elite and tend to have “a deliberate reduction” of news pieces, as Quandt (2008) noticed. News headlines at the front page of Western in-depth sections were usually accompanied with leads and brief introduction, contrasting with the Chinese practice of headlines only. It is

interesting to note that the hyperlink at Chinese websites always opens a new tab or window, leaving the original web page unchanged. This contrasts sharply to Western hyperlinks that mostly open in the same window. This subtle difference actually reveals at least three implications. To begin with, the Chinese in-depth section plays a role of a catalogue site that collects as much related news and information as possible. Users click on the titles that interest them and frequently return to the in-depth section looking for more hyperlinks. Therefore, a possible reading habit of Chinese users would be clicking on a few headlines at one time, and then reading them all. In contrast, the design of Western websites seems to favour users consuming news articles one by one and exploring their way with the help of navigational tools. This may partly explain the previous finding on inactive interactivity that Chinese websites generally had fewer navigational elements than Western websites, since the in-depth section displayed almost everything. Moreover, the minor difference of hypertext design indicates the fact that Chinese websites emphasize variation in the pursuit of comprehensiveness, while Anglo-American websites favour long stories in the pursuit of depth. As will be evident in the following section on textual news analysis, Chinese news coverage tries to achieve comprehensiveness by involving compound dimensions through a variety of news pieces. In the West, through gathering voices of sources, insiders, experts and authorities, news websites prefer a long piece of news in the pursuit of depth. In addition, the very design of Chinese in-depth sections tends to be a contributing factor to the increasing number of sensational or less relevant news titles. Largely due to the feature of hypertexted headlines only, there were quite a few news stories wrapped in sensational, eye-catching titles, whose news content sometimes had little in common with them, as will be evident in the textual news analysis. From a marketing perspective, websites may make a profit by gaining more clicks through placing such attractive but hollow news headlines. However, the tabloid tendency risks damaging the reputation of the media brand in the long run.

The different journalistic values are also evident through the use of external hyperlinks. The findings here indicate that Chinese online media emphasize

comprehensiveness, whereas Western internet media emphasize editorial expertise. Echoing the trend of internal links utilization, the front pages of Chinese in-depth sections generally possessed a larger number as well as a wider variety of external links than the Western counterparts, as shown in the table below.

External hyperlinks offered by the front page of the Olympic in-depth sections under study:

New York Times	Olympic home page; Beijing 2008 Summer Games; Official news; Sports and events; Xinhua News Olympic Coverage (In English); Emblem of the 2008 Summer Games; US Olympic Committee; and US Olympic trials.
NBC	International Olympic Committee; Universal sports; and Team USA.
Guardian	No external hyperlinks
BBC	Beijing 2008; Medal predictions for all events; and International Olympic Committee.
NZHerald	Beijing 2008 Official site; and NZ Olympic Committee Official site.
TVNZ	Beijing 2008 Official site; and NZ Olympic Committee Official site.
Xinhuanet	No external hyperlinks
CCTV	No external hyperlinks
Sohu	Cooperative television (43); online newspaper (35); media organization (9); Olympic cooperative websites (35, e.g. Xinhuanet, <i>People's Daily</i> )
Sina	Sports discussion forums (12); Olympic Coverage Alliance (20, e.g. Tencent, NetEase); Cooperative media (16); icon of "more"
Tencent (QQ)	Olympic Coverage Alliance (e.g. Sina, NetEase)

NetEase	Olympic cooperative media (18); Cooperative online evening newspaper (25); Olympic cooperative television (15); Cooperative column (10); Cooperative websites (33)
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It is interesting to note that the most linked to external websites in the West are the official Olympic sites, while the most linked to external websites in China are a variety of news websites within the Olympic Coverage Alliance. Western websites usually linked externally to websites of the IOC, and (or) the NOC. Only two websites had media links. The NYT linked to Xinhua Olympic News and NBC linked to Universal Sports. In contrast, the Chinese portal sites had a long list of links to a wide variety of news media online. As mentioned in the background chapter, the Olympic Coverage Alliance in China incorporated both traditional media, such as newspaper, radio and television, as well as web-only news websites, such as the portal sites. The front page of Chinese in-depth sections often linked to the websites of allied or cooperative media. For example, Sohu had external links to 43 television websites, 35 online newspapers, 9 media organizations and 35 Olympic cooperative websites. It should be noted that Sohu had no external links to the other three portal sites analyzed here, while the three historically competitive websites, namely, Sina, QQ and NetEase, did link to each other during the Olympics. This interesting phenomenon is largely owing to the structure of the Olympic Coverage Alliances. As introduced earlier, Sina, QQ and NetEase formed an alliance to compete with Sohu, after Sohu claimed to have gained some priority in Olympic news coverage. In response, Sohu also formed an alliance, linking up with a number of media websites, as listed above. The findings strongly suggest that the Beijing Olympic Games helped to strengthen a cooperative media landscape in China on the one hand and intensified the competition among some media on the other hand. Moreover, all the portal sites examined here had links to Xinhuanet, but the front page of the in-depth section at Xinhuanet offered no external links at all. Nor did the website of CCTV. In the “family” of online mainstream media in China, the websites of Xinhua and CCTV tend to play the role

of “big brother” and “big sister”. Being the organs of the Chinese authorities, the two websites have been granted premier resources and their unshakable status has protected them from the “Olympian web war”. They do not bind themselves to any particular alliance; instead, they feed almost every member in either Olympic Coverage Alliance. Given their special position in the Chinese media system, these two websites cannot favour just a few. This might be the main reason for the two websites offering no links to other news websites. Generally speaking, Chinese portal sites are by definition dependent on news feeds from other media, a fact that shapes the tight cooperation with a number of media, both online and offline. Nevertheless, the competition between two Olympic Coverage Alliances that were led by different portal sites became increasingly intense during the Beijing Olympics.

The findings strongly imply that the function of external hyperlinks to “open up new content” (Deuze, 2001) is generally underdeveloped. Quite a few in-depth sections (e.g. the Guardian, CCTV and Xinhuanet) possessed not a single external link at their in-depth sections. Though providing a handful of external links, Chinese portal sites made practically no connections to the “outside world”, since the hyperlinks would link externally only to sites within the Alliance. Given the fact that websites of the same Olympic Coverage Alliance shared and exchanged a lot of news material, the external links here play less a role of helping viewers finding out new things, and more a role of cross-advertising each other. This question of the use of both internal and external hyperlinks will be explored further when examining the textual news articles.

#### 5.4.2 Analysis within textual news items

This phase of analysis explores the actual employment of the potential of hypertextuality within news stories. According to the literature, the use of hypertexts and hyperlinks would help news writing achieve context and completeness (Kawamoto, 2003); signs were emerging of a shift of journalistic practice from a condensed-news approach to a “contextualized journalism” strategy (Pavlik, 2001:

23); and the fundamental characteristics of the web would become one of “self-conscious hypertextuality” and “seamless intertextuality” that constantly invite surfers moving to another textual node (Mitra and Cohen, 1999). On the basis of these theories, the hypertextuality of news in texts is analyzed along two dimensions. First is the analysis of hyperlinks in the form of headlines, pictures, and video that sit beside, below or in the middle of the news story. Particular attention is devoted to the number of hyperlinks, the kind of hyperlinks and the use of external and internal hyperlinks. Then the second dimension of analysis focuses on “clickable text” (hypertext) inside the news story, which is usually shown in a bright color or is underlined. Particular attention is paid to what kind of words or phrases would usually be hyperlinked and whether the hypertext serves users by allowing them to get closer to the source and context.

### *Hyperlinks*

The analysis here takes the news of the closing ceremony<sup>89</sup> as an example to further investigate websites’ utilization of hyperlinks. In line with the previous finding on front page hyperlinks, the news stories at Chinese websites were accompanied by far more hyperlinks than Western counterparts. The fashion that Chinese websites value news variation more than news depth is still evident in this stage of study. Close examination reveals that Western websites provided viewers with a selection of related headlines to understand the news in more depth, whereas Chinese hyperlinks often took the surfer further through the website. As exemplified below, Western websites though usually offered no more than a dozen hyperlinks for each news piece; most of the hyperlinks were highly related to the news. Besides the textual news “Triumph of Beijing raises bar for London, says IOC chief”<sup>90</sup>, the Guardian put 9 related hyperlinks under “More on this story”. Picture hyperlinks of “Olympics closing ceremony”, news hyperlinks of “IOC chief: Beijing raises bar for 2012”,

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<sup>89</sup> Previous analysis has taken the coverage of the opening ceremony and popular competitions as instances. In order to deliver a more generalizable result, this stage of analysis takes an instance differentiating from previous examples.

<sup>90</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/aug/25/olympics2012.olympics20081> (accessed 25 August 2008).



“Marina Hyde on the closing ceremony”, “London puts on a very British handover party”, blog hyperlinks of “news blog: how can London follow Beijing” and so on provided viewers with much relevant information on the closing ceremony. Similarly, the website of the BBC placed 11 news hyperlinks alongside the news of “Beijing bids farewell to Olympics”.<sup>91</sup> News headlines, such as “China delighted with Olympics”, “Olympic final day as it happened”, “London takes over as Olympic host”, and Queen hails British Olympic glory”, played an important role in equipping viewers with more information deep into the “farewell”. It is the BBC’s tradition to embed multimedia contents in the textual news, such as pictures, audio and video clips, thus the hyperlinks under “see also” are mainly text news. The news story “Truly exceptional Games”<sup>92</sup> at NBCOlympic.com was complemented by a box, which contained 4 video hyperlinks, 4 photo hyperlinks and 2 related stories. The NYT’s news piece “Olympics close with a bang and a double-decker bus”<sup>93</sup> had one related news link of “London’s countdown to 2012 begins with questions” and a link to the schedules as well as a link to journalists’ blogs. Similarly, TVNZ presented a sole related news story “Double exposure for NZ flag” to complement the news “Closing ceremony: all aboard the Beckham bus”.<sup>94</sup> Compared with the above five websites, NZHerald.co.nz is a slightly different site. Among all the Western websites under analysis, the website of NZHerald offered the most hyperlinks beside the news story, but few links were closely related to the closing ceremony. Except a photo hyperlink of “Olympic closing ceremony”<sup>95</sup>, dozens of hyperlinks beside the news story had nothing related to the closing ceremony, for example, hyperlinks of “Best of Olympic opinion”, and “Rowing: high achiever happy with low profile”. The discussion above suggests that the hyperlinks besides news stories at Western in-depth sections mainly play a role of facilitating different levels of depth, rather than

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<sup>91</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/olympics/7578133.stm> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>92</sup> Available at: <http://www.nbcolympics.com/newscenter/news/newsid=254895.html> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>93</sup> Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/25/sports/olympics/25beijing.html> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>94</sup> Available at: <http://tvnz.co.nz/content/2031045> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>95</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/olympic-games/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=502&objectid=10528773](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/olympic-games/news/article.cfm?c_id=502&objectid=10528773) (accessed 25 August 2008).

different kinds of digital convergence. Text is still the cornerstone for news websites. Except for the website of the BBC, all the other sites enabled the convergence of the news text with little multimedia or video storytelling via hypertexts or hyperlinks. Instances of incorporating information from other sites via external links are rare.

In contrast, hyperlinks alongside Chinese news stories mainly enhance digital convergence and play a weak role in developing news depth. As mentioned earlier, we can easily spot the main news story for a particular event (e.g. the closing ceremony) at Western websites. However, it is difficult to point out only one representative news piece about the opening ceremony at Chinese websites, since the significant news event, such as the closing ceremony, is often covered by numerous chunky news stories and enclosed in a special subsection. Therefore, I have examined at least ten news stories on the closing ceremony from each of the Chinese subsections. Though the following is not an absolute counting, it is typical of a pattern observed in the Chinese websites. Sohu normally offered 10 related news titles and 10 related searches below the story and another 10 news titles of the day, 5 news titles on the Chinese team, 6 picture hyperlinks, 14 video links, 14 blog links, and 15 links from the community relevant to the news story. Among them, only the 20 links right below the story and the 14 video links were connected to the closing ceremony. Similarly, NetEase offered more than 50 hyperlinks, with less than 20 that were closely related. Sina, Xinhuanet and CCTV offered around 20 hyperlinks respectively for each news story on the closing ceremony. Tencent provided the largest number of hyperlinks, with more than 80 hyperlinks surrounding the news article on the closing ceremony. Only about 30 hyperlinks out of the total 80 links at Tencent were about the closing ceremony. A lot of links under the title of “recommended”, “in focus” or “highlight”, were human-interest focused and irrelevant to the closing ceremony. The findings here suggest that in terms of hypertextuality, Chinese news websites pay much attention to attraction and variation of the news, rather than the depth of the news, since the depth has already been explored through a large number of chunky stories on the event.

Moreover, if we see the Western hyperlinks as being placed in a modest manner, the Chinese hyperlinks are indeed deliberately placed in a “loud” manner. This sharp contrast is evident from the snapshots below.

Snapshots of hyperlinks beside news stories:

BBC:

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24 Aug 08 | Olympics
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23 Aug 08 | UK News
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NBC:

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#### Highlights

A five-minute recap of the Closing Ceremony from Beijing

- [Rock-and-roll montage of the Beijing Games](#)
- [Culture of the Beijing games](#)
- [Class Act: Sportsmanship in Beijing](#)

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#### 2008 memorable moments

Just a few of the memorable moments of this year's Olympic Games in Beijing.

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Xinhuanet:



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[焰火]烟花"画"出倒计时数字 自"29"开始寓意第29届
[升旗]全场共唱中华人民共和国国歌 五星红旗升起
[宣传片]北京奥运会宣传片：同一个世界 同一个梦想
◆第二部分 文艺表演《相聚》
[鼓阵]飞天大鼓从天降 银铃舞者热情迎 传统不失时尚
[入场]张宁高举五星红旗入场 姚明热情拥抱金发美女
[致辞]刘淇:用满腔热情兑现承诺 罗格:真正的无与伦比
[交接]市长举行奥林匹克会旗交接仪式：从北京到伦敦
[伦敦8分钟]小贝领衔精彩上演 双层巴士顶上大秀球技
◆第三部分 文艺表演《记忆圣火熄灭》

NetEase:

**网易奥运-闭幕式报道**

**罗格:北京奥运真正的无与伦比 群星唱响闭幕曲**

视频:"伦敦8分钟"上演 小贝巴士上开球

CNN:北京奥运在令人惊叹的表演中结束

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荷兰运动员闭幕式现场求婚  
闭幕式铃衣每件绣千只灯泡  
张艺谋赞伦敦8分钟创意很棒  
奥运闭幕式贵宾及运动员退场  
第29届北京奥运会闭幕式结束

韦唯与孙楠合唱《超越》  
宋祖英多明戈唱《爱的火焰》  
北京奥运圣火熄灭  
第二节文艺表演《记忆》开始  
贝克汉姆领衔表演"伦敦8分钟"

**▶ 赛事盘点**

中国军团半数金牌由新人获得  
中国单届奥运奖牌数首次百枚  
邹市明拳击为中国拿下第50金  
古巴跆拳道选手遭终生禁赛  
中国艺术体操队夺得首枚奖牌

奥运男足决赛没有惊喜(图)  
十米跳台最后一跳失乾坤(图)  
鸟巢迟到的"美国风暴"(图)  
十大震撼世界的运动员(组图)  
奥运赛场上的"王室之花"(图)

**▶ 评说奥运**

中国51金显现出奥运新格局  
奥运落幕 中国翻开新的一页  
德国媒体:中国乒乓球太强大  
菲律宾称北京奥运会光耀史册  
日媒称:奥运未出现反日情绪

索马里为参加北京奥运而自豪  
不要假装对金牌不在乎  
时评:谢幕一刻,中国感谢世界  
我们对北京奥运"难说再见"  
通讯:倾倒美国的"北京16天"



小贝将亮相伦敦8分钟



少林小子将献艺闭幕式



奥运会闭幕式大猜想

Chinese websites seem to overemphasize the hyperlinks. Many favoured employing

sizeable hyperlink boxes that consisted of pictures, video thumbnails and news headlines. Such hyperlinks were ubiquitous at Chinese websites. Not only below and beside the news story, hyperlinks sometimes were embedded right below the news headlines or in the middle of the news story. Instead of being useful complements, hyperlinks in that case become distractions or even disruptions that made it harder for viewers to concentrate on the news itself. One more aspect that deserves attention is the employment of hyperlinks in netizens' contributions. Among the hyperlinks beside Chinese news stories, quite a few were links to blogs written by ordinary people, which is in sharp contrast to the dominant hyperlinks of news pieces among Western websites.

The findings firmly show variants of the web news genre and thus indicate two different logics in the use of hypertextuality. Western websites show the logic of "drilling down" that enables viewers to go into certain extent of depth as they desire through hyperlinks. Chinese websites are driven by a "promotion" logic that engages surfers with more appealing pages. The Chinese approach of utilizing hyperlinks appears to be a response to some scholars' assertion that users do not have the patience to read texts on screen. Perhaps being afraid that audience may lose their patience when reading texts and might leave the website quickly, Chinese news websites, as well as providing chunky news articles, are busy paving the road to other attracted pages to keep their audience clicking around. The commercial concern together with the highly competitive atmosphere of Chinese web news market are main contributing factors to the overemphasis on the hyperlinks. Despite numerous differences elaborated above, there is one common trait shared by both Chinese and Western websites. All the websites studied here have made heavy use of internal links, leaving the external links largely unexplored. According to my close examination, no websites under analysis offered any external links that complemented the news stories. This is in line with findings from a number of previous empirical studies that very few websites provided extensive external hyperlinks (Tankard and Ban, 1998; Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000; Deuze, 2001; Tremayne, 2005). This point will be discussed

further shortly together with findings drawn from the following analysis on hypertexts within news stories.

### *Hypertexts*

The study of “clickable texts” within the news story indicates significant differences between Chinese and Western websites in aspects of the quantity and variety of textual nodes, the destination of hypertexts, and the use of internal and external hyperlinks. It is helpful to employ a content analysis here to make the differences more visible. Since the sample articles were randomly selected and covered news on every Game day during the 2008 Summer Olympics, the findings below are believed to be able reliably to shed light on a general trend of websites’ utilization of hypertexts. By examining two news stories daily (hard news only) from each of the twelve news websites along the 17-day Olympics, I counted the number of hypertexts utilized by each website, and took notes on the destination of the hypertext as well as the kind of words or phrases that were made into hypertexts. A total of 408 news articles were analyzed, with 204 news stories from the six Chinese websites and 204 news stories from the six Anglo-American websites. 34 news stories from each website have been studied.



	Sina	Sohu	QQ	NetEase	Xinhuanet	CCTV
total number of hypertexts	59	11	149	95	0	/
total number of news articles	34	34	34	34	34	/
average number of hypertexts per news story	1.74	0.32	4.38	2.79	0	/
hypertexts of disciplines	20	2	29	30	0	/
hypertexts of athletes	4	1	50	9	0	/
hypertexts of countries	0	0	0	44	0	/
others	“sports” (9) “Olympics” or “Beijing Olympics” (23) others (3)	8	“gold (silver/bro nze) medals” or “medals” (22) others (48)	12	0	/

Anglo-American websites:

	New York Times	NBC	Guardian	BBC	NZHerald	TVNZ
total number of hypertexts	344	184	0	0	0	0
total number of news articles	34	34	34	34	34	34
average number of hypertexts per news story	10.12	5.41	0	0	0	0
hypertexts of disciplines	77	0	0	0	0	0
hypertexts of athletes	125	178	0	0	0	0
hypertexts of companies	37	0	0	0	0	0
hypertexts of organizations	20	0	0	0	0	0
hypertexts of countries	0	6	0	0	0	0
Others	85	0	0	0	0	0

As is evident from the figures above, the use of hypertexts within news stories is underdeveloped among a good many websites. In China, Xinhuanet did not include a single hypertext in its news stories. The website of CCTV was excluded from the content analysis here because of its inconsistent style and heavy repetitions of hypertexts. Among the 34 sampled news articles from CCTV.com, some had no hypertexts at all, while some had more than twenty hypertexts per article, but with

only one or two variants. This inconsistency makes it difficult to reach conclusions through quantitative study, where patterns are assumed. Two pieces of CCTV news on 18 August 2008 can be used as an example here.

Snapshots of CCTV news articles:<sup>96</sup>

北京时间8月18日，2008年北京奥运会田径比赛继续在“鸟巢”体育场进行，中国飞人刘翔在第六小组出场。

在赛前热身的时候，刘翔在第二组跑的时候跨过第四栏时，趴在了地上。右脚好像出了问题，一瘸一拐的走向休息处。据悉，是刘翔脚后跟的老伤出了问题，今天的热身中这个地方再次出现了疼痛感。在正式比赛开始的时候，刘翔在第一枪之后因伤不得不遗憾的宣布退赛。

随后在发布会上孙海平流下了热泪，为爱徒的遗憾退赛惋惜不已，同时也对刘翔的坚持给予了肯定。孙海平说：“刘翔今天一直在坚持。”说到这里，他潸然泪下。他接着说：“我们在现场有三个医生在现场帮他处理伤情，但他的跟骨是受力的地方，只要脚一撑就软下来。但他始终在坚持。最后我们没办法，在检录处，我们请了一位体院的副院长给他按摩，用最强烈的刺激帮他。当时刘翔浑身在抖。做过运动员的都晓得，在大赛前，这种疼痛不是说克服就能克服的。”

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<sup>96</sup> Available at: <http://news.cctv.com/china/20080818/104765.shtml>  
<http://news.cctv.com/china/20080818/107832.shtml> (accessed 28 August 2008).

8月18日上午，在北京奥运男子110米栏第1轮第6组比赛中，中国选手刘翔因腿伤遗憾退出比赛。中新社发 盛佳鹏 摄

中新社北京八月十八日电 带着极为痛苦的面部表情，二十五岁的刘翔低下头，默默离开了“鸟巢”跑道。

十八日，“中国飞人”因伤退赛，震惊了中国，也震惊了世界。

更让人感到惊诧的是，刘翔退赛原因并非此前广为人知的大腿拉伤，而是来自右脚跟腱的常年旧疾发作。

对此，一位资深体育记者在稿件中提出“为什么此前竟一无所知？”之疑问。奥运前夕，这家媒体曾围绕刘翔大腿伤情发出两篇“解密”报道，透露出的信息分别是“刘翔有伤，夺金困难”和“刘翔伤愈，状态良好”。

就在刘翔退赛之前，上海东方体育日报十八日上午刊发了一篇近三千字的长文并登于网络，其中对于刘翔的右脚跟腱伤病有着惊人的细节描述。

这篇堪称“绝对独家”的新闻报道，虽然未引起人们关注，但却和此后关于退赛新闻发布会的内容完全一致。

当事人刘翔并未出席这场被中外媒体挤爆的发布会。他的教练孙海平在谈及刘翔严重伤情时数度泪流满面，并称为比赛“刘翔一直在玩命”，他还透露刘翔也落了泪。

与孙海平共同出席发布会的中国田径队总教练冯树勇宣布，“鉴于刘翔的伤情，他今年将缺席欧洲田径赛事，也许明年会参加，不过他肯定会回来的。”

当刘翔退出比赛后，镜头前潸然泪下，长年专注跟踪刘翔的中央电视台记者冬日娜爆出惊天内幕：刘翔在八月八日曾跑出十二秒八零的测试成绩！

据知，男子一百一十米栏现世界纪录为十二秒八七，其拥有者为刘翔在北京奥运会的最大劲敌——未满二十二岁的古巴小将罗伯斯。而前世界纪录十二秒八八创造者刘翔，在今年奥运会前曾跑出十二秒一八

The above snapshots were news about Chinese hurdler Liu Xiang, taken from CCTV online news. The two news articles were published on the same day (18 August 2008) and about the same athlete. However, the way web editors handled the hypertext is problematic. The athlete's name, Liu Xiang, was underlined all over the top news story. Wherever the name Liu Xiang appeared, it was edited as a hypertext. Thus, there were seven exactly the same hypertexts out of a total of eight hypertexts in this news article. In contrast, the news article below it contained not a single hypertext. Examples of inconsistency and heavy repetitions of hypertexts abound in CCTV news stories. Therefore, samples from CCTV website were not coded here. The other four Chinese websites studied here offered limited hypertexts. Tencent provided an average of about four hypertexts per news story, which is the most among Chinese websites under analysis, followed by NetEase (mean=2.79), Sina (mean=1.74) and Sohu (mean=0.32). In the West, except the two American ones, websites from the UK

and New Zealand did not tend to employ any hypertexts within news stories.

Generally speaking, the potential of hypertexts in news stories is insufficiently explored among Chinese websites studied here. First of all, a large number of hypertexts are far from meaningful. For example, all of the portal sites put “Beijing Olympic Game”, or “Olympics” as hypertexts, which linked back to the front page of the in-depth news section of the Beijing Olympic Games, rather than an archive of any previous Olympics. Given the fact that viewers are already surfing in the news section of 2008 Olympics, the ubiquitous hypertexts of “Olympics” or “Beijing Olympic Games” seem a bit superfluous. The news stories at QQ were filled with numerous hypertexts of “medal”, “gold medal”, “silver medal”, and “bronze medal”. All of these hypertexts led to the same web page of the Beijing Olympic medal table (<http://2008.qq.com/medals>). In addition, some of the hypertexts were misleading. For example, the word “rocket” that describes a player’s speed was edited as a hypertext and referred to a web page introducing the American basketball team, the “Houston Rockets”. More ridiculously, the hypertext of the stadium “Bird’s Nest” in Beijing takes surfers to a few posts about bird nests in the forest. Furthermore, Chinese websites provided a narrow variety of textual nodes. As shown in the table above, only two kinds of texts were heavily linked—disciplines and athletes. Companies, organizations and governments were not considered as textual nodes by web editors in China. Compared with Chinese websites, the NYT presented a larger number of hypertexts and a significantly wider variety of textual nodes. The NYT offered an average of some ten hypertexts per news story, according to the content analysis (mean=10.12). Hypertexts in the sampled news articles consisted of athletes, politicians, celebrities, companies, disciplines, organizations, as well as various other terms (others=85), such as “vegetarians”, “Olympic torch”, “immigration”, “anti-doping”, “New York Stock Exchange” and so on. The hypertext employed by the NYT greatly enhanced the availability of various contexts and constantly invited viewers to surf the website along diverse routes. The non-linear and dynamic model of news display, as advocated by media scholars (e.g. Huesca, 2000; Hall, 2001), is

evident within news stories at the NYT.

Echoing the trend found in the analysis of hyperlinks, the hypertexts at most Chinese news stories mainly play a role of news promotion, rather than context-adding. An analysis on the destination of hypertexts would be helpful to make this point more clear. Hypertexts at websites of Sina, Sohu and Tencent often directed viewers to related subsections. For example, Sina made heavy use of hypertexts on words such as “sports”, “ping-pong”, and “Liu Xiang”, which were linked to Sina’s news relevant subsections. The news subsection was often fully filled with the latest news headlines as well as pictures and video around the key word, rather than background or historical summaries. The hypertextuality here functions less as context-provision, more as information-bombing that attracts viewers clicking around on a particular topic. Such a hypertext-design can be seen as a kind of promotion strategy employed by websites. The findings here contrast with Tremayne’s (2004) proposal that news articles on the web may become both more event-driven and more contextual via hypertexts. In fact, my study here finds that many Chinese news stories incorporated background information below or beside the news story, instead of employing hypertexts. For example, all of the sampled articles from Chinese websites that covered Li Ning, who ignited the cauldron at the opening ceremony, put a brief introduction of Li below or beside the news story, instead of editing Li Ning as a hypertext. Admittedly, the study on special topic section would reduce the amount of event reporting and context provision, since the entire section is focusing on the Olympics. Therefore, the finding may not be generalisable to the rest of the sites.

The website of NetEase seems to be slightly different from the other three portals and it resembles the NYT to some extent in the aspect of the destination of hypertexts within news stories. All of the hypertexts in the NYT’s news articles are linked to the “Times’ Topics”, which contains news, reference material and archival information published mainly by the NYT. Similarly, hypertexts in NetEase’s news stories are connected to the “NetEase’s Data”, which consists of background, reference material,

historical information, as well as the latest news headlines, pictures, video and related netizens' posts. The practice of the NYT and NetEase suggests an integrated use of hyperlinks for both historical context and latest contents. Hypertexts in the NYT and NetEase seem to fulfil the function of both context-adding and news-promotion to a great extent. The site is the only one to exemplify Fredin's (1997) claim that online journalism would become less selective and more inclusive of the widest possible range of information via hypertextuality.

In addition to the context, much literature suggests the great importance of linking through to source texts, but few of the websites analyzed here employed hypertexts in an effective manner in this regard. All Western websites examined here offered no external links for sources. More precisely, if the news originated from a newspaper, television station, news agencies, or other news websites, the source acknowledgement was usually not clickable; if the news originated from the website itself, the source indication was usually a hypertextual reference. For example, the *Observer* was always edited as a hypertext on the Guardian, since it belongs to the same newspaper group as the Guardian. Additionally, the Guardian and the NYT usually made bylines clickable, so that viewers could find more articles by the author within the website. In China, the websites of Xinhua and CCTV did not have any "clickable" source references. As mentioned earlier, web portals usually had more external links due to their news-dependent nature. The four portal sites in China put the sources as hypertexts, referring to the source site outside of the portal site. However, the hypertext only leads viewers to the front page of the source site, rather than to the exact news article from that website. Therefore, we can conclude that the function of hypertexts in linking to source material was not quite performed in this case. Most often, news websites preferred publishing all the information on their own websites, including transcripts, interviews, complete documents, and so on. Web editors would only indicate the origin of the information, rather than take viewers directly to that originating news outlet. Commercial concerns might be a main contributing factor influencing the link usage. Websites are cautious of guiding

viewers to other sites. As Tremayne observes, “if television news favors good pictures to hold an audience, we might expect web editors to use links strategically to keep readers on their sites” (2004: 250).

More importantly, my study on hypertexts finds a blurred line between editorial and commercial content in the Chinese online environment. In many news stories, Sohu took advantage of hypertexts to promote its sponsors. The hypertext below was seen in quite a few news articles from Sohu.

“北京奥运会 ([搜狐联想2008奥运](#)、[联想官网](#)) ”

Translated as: “Beijing Olympic Games ([Sohu Lenovo 2008 Olympics](#), [Official Website of Lenovo](#))”

The hypertext of Lenovo (Sohu’s main sponsor during the 2008 Olympic Game) was abruptly embedded in news stories and was usually placed right after the word “Olympics”. In this case, the commercial element actually penetrated into the news texts. This practice blurred the line between news and advertisements, a significant problem given the “impartiality” of the digital form noted in the literature review (Feldman, 1997) through which all kinds of content can be radically combined and former boundaries between the likes of information and advertisement crossed. Indeed, a large number of ads in Sohu’s site were unmarked and mixed with news links. It is noted that except “ads by Google”, all the other kinds of advertisement in Chinese websites were not clearly indicated as “advertisement”. Instead, the ad links were often placed under headings such as “special offer”, “wise investment”, “investment guides” or even “highlights” and “recommended”. Quandt’s (2008) assertion that the explicit separation between ads and news content in print or television now is eroding in the online environment is clearly evident in the Chinese case.

Another noticeable problem that exists in every Chinese website under study is the



inconsistency of utilizing hypertexts. It was common to find that within the same news story, some disciplines or athletes were underlined, while some were not. For example, in one of the sampled news articles from NetEase, the disciplines of “weightlifting” and “trampoline” as well as the countries of “France” and “Australia” were edited as hypertexts, whereas “archery” and “sailing” as well as “America” in the same news were not presented as hypertexts. The random style of handling the hypertext is also evident in most of Sina’s news stories. The inconsistency of QQ is characterized by the discrepancy of hypertext destinations. Database, maps, score tables, medal tables, news subsections and discussion forums are all possible destinations for hypertexts within news stories. More importantly, Chinese news stories examined here share a common trait that athletes other than Chinese were rarely edited as hypertexts. According to my close examination, apart from two popular medalists, Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt, no other foreign names were underlined as hypertexts among the 204 Chinese news articles. This indicates a restricted lens employed by Chinese websites in terms of utilizing hypertextuality. In fact, it would be very helpful to put names other than Chinese as hypertexts, since Chinese viewers might not be familiar with athletes from other countries. The hypertext in that case would play an important role in equipping surfers with the background or archival information to complement the news. The deficiency here reveals that hypertexts at Chinese websites are motivated less by knowledge-building, and more by commercial concerns. In contrast, the American websites examined here have shown an intense interest in constructing a “self-conscious” hypertextuality and “seamless intertextuality” through the use of hypertexts, as suggested by Mitra and Cohen (1999). The websites of the NYT and NBC demonstrate a highly global attitude. The hypertextual names on these two websites include athletes, politicians and celebrities from around the world.

### *Summary*

The study of hyperlinks and hypertexts in the twelve websites suggests that the potential of hypertextuality, as indicated by the literature, is for the most part not

actualized. In the aspect of context-provision, only the American websites under study offered various kinds of related information to complement the news story. The trend towards “self-conscious” hypertextuality and “seamless intertextuality”, as Mitra and Cohen (1999) envisioned, is not clearly shown from other websites. With regard to the use of internal and external hypertexts, the study here stands with other empirical findings (Tankard and Ban, 1998; Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000; Halavais, 2000; Dueze, 2001; Tremayne, 2005; Quandt, 2008) in concluding that journalism on the web is far from “worldwide”. All the websites examined here made heavy use of internal links, leaving external links either largely unexplored, or ineffectively utilized. Previous empirical studies suggest that the national boundaries and language zones play a crucial role in the loose connection of websites to the rest of the World Wide Web. However, my study here finds that websites not only restrain their links within countries; most employ the hyperlink strategically to keep viewers within the website. The ability of hypertexts to take viewers closer to the source is not prominent among websites under study. Commercial concerns, rather than language or boundary barriers, tends to be the main contributing factor to this pattern. Three main problems existing in Chinese web journalism are evident through the analysis: a blurred line between editorial and commercial content, inconsistency in the utilization of hypertexts and a very restricted lens in the design of hypertexts. The findings strongly suggest that there is a lack of emphasis on depth of information on the Chinese web-based media and the internet’s potential is renegotiated in quite complex ways within the commercial structure and the media system in China. The “promotion” tactic dominates Chinese websites’ practice of employing hyperlinks. Then the Olympic Coverage Alliances constructed by two groups of web media led to a rather contradictory use of hypertextuality—a contemporary interconnected landscape among members in the same alliance and absolute disconnect among media of different alliances. Being the organs of the Chinese authorities, websites of CCTV and Xinhuanet have been granted premier resources and their unshakable status has protected them from the intense competition. They had no links to other websites, but all the other websites under analysis had links to them, as they are crucial news

feeders in China.

## 5.5 Textual news analysis

Despite the increasing popularity of multimedia and interactive news, it is widely acknowledged that the textual news coverage has remained the indispensable core of mainstream web journalism. This stage of analysis specifically focuses on news coverage from the twelve in depth sections during the time of the Games (from 8 August to 24 August 2008). As introduced in the previous chapter on method and theory, this stage of analysis is based on Rivenburgh's (2004) summary of variations found in previous empirical research on Olympic coverage. Three aspects, including the amount of news coverage given to the Games, the balance of media attention within the event to specific sports, nations and athletes, and the depth and breadth of news topics, are closely examined within the 2008 Olympic coverage. Particular attention has been devoted to the various dynamics in the news flow, such as sources, updates, balance, varieties, contexts, comprehensiveness, the story length, and the emphasis of news topics. Admittedly, the textual practice might be largely determined by the source (usually the print or news agency) texts. Nevertheless, the choice of texts and the deployment of textual news (e.g. frequent updating) are distinctive features of web news practice. The possible reliance on those other media for the textual news is a relevant but not a dominant concern to this phase of analysis, since the main emphasis here is the comparison between Anglo-American and Chinese news sites. Several popular topics of research in previous Olympic-related research, namely, the news coverage on the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games, and the news coverage of key competitions, are focused on again here. By focusing on these specific events, detailed comparisons between Chinese and Western news stories can be elaborated as follows.

To start with, in terms of the quantity of Olympic news stories, Chinese in-depth sections offered far more pieces of news than their Western counterparts. There is a

large amount of breaking news for the Games, usually written in one or two sentences. For example, though all Chinese websites under analysis have live text reports for the opening ceremony, every step of the ceremony has still been reported as breaking news. It is interesting to find that at 19:59 on 8 August, almost every Chinese website has issued a one-sentence-breaking-news “The opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics (formally) begins”. Then the commencement of each stage of fireworks, each performance, each team’s parade, and other moments have all been treated as breaking news. This practice resulted in a huge amount of news, which is a prominent feature of Chinese web journalism. For the opening ceremony alone, there were hundreds of news pieces on each Chinese website. In contrast, none of the Western websites under analysis had more than ten pieces of text news for the opening ceremony. This difference can be largely explained in terms of the different online journalistic values. “Immediacy” or “timely updates” are considered to be the defining attribute of web news and have been given a high priority in Chinese news websites. As elaborated at the beginning of this chapter, driven by the fierce competition within the digital media industry,<sup>97</sup> being the first to issue the report tends to be regarded as of the utmost importance in the eyes of chief executives of the Chinese websites under study. The high number of news stories is also closely related to a characteristic journalistic practice on these sites whereby older stories are never replaced, but allowed to accumulate. With regard to the Western coverage, timeliness seems not that urgent a factor for the website. There were not many news pieces on a single event, but every piece of news was relatively long. For example, unlike other sites’ tactic of indicating posting or updating time of news coverage, the NYT only denotes dates, which reveals its newspaper heritage and a relative neglect of the internet’s attribute of timeliness. This finding confirms Boczkowski’s (2004a) observation that the NYT is slow to change to the values of the web. According to Barnhurst, US newspaper stories online “differ very little from those printed in the originating newspaper”, and the “internet versions do not usually add to or change the text of the

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<sup>97</sup> The fierce competition is described in the introduction. Articles such as “dot-coms begin the battle for real gold” and “an Olympian Web war in China” indicated the intense situation.

stories” (2002: 477).

More precisely, compared with online textual news in the West, news stories at Chinese websites are by and large shorter and chunkier. As elaborated in the literature review, the general consensus from professionals and scholars is that lengthy news stories should be broken up into “nuggets” or “chunks”. The small page size is believed to be able to facilitate navigation on the screen by reducing the need for scrolling. News websites analyzed in this research, whether Chinese or Western, mostly applied those principles. However, with regard to specific practice of news-in-chunks, there are slight differences between Chinese and Western websites. It is more common for Chinese websites to divide news coverage into a few separate news articles, so that each article becomes short and tells only a single dimension of a specific event. For example, similar to the practice of presenting photos, Chinese news coverage for the opening ceremony was split into a series of news articles, such as the fireworks show, the opening speech of Jacques Rogge (President of the IOC), music, performances, costumes and so on. Each news story is short and requires little scrolling. On Western websites, we normally find only one or two news stories covering the entire opening ceremony, and they are relatively long in which users must do some scrolling to finish reading. Nevertheless, editors segmented information into very short paragraphs. Usually one or two sentences make up a paragraph, so that one news story can have dozens of paragraphs. Taking the website of the BBC as an instance, it offered only one piece of hard news—“Games begin with spectacular show”<sup>98</sup>—for the opening ceremony. This 850-word report covers a wide variety of events, such as pyrotechnics, performance, and parade, as well as a handful of key figures, such as Li Ning who lit the Olympic cauldron, the president of IOC, the Chinese president, both British and Chinese flag bearers, the director of the opening ceremony and so on. Each dimension, or more precisely, each paragraph in this article was usually made into a separate news story at Chinese websites. Moreover, the BBC’s article also mentions aspects beyond the opening ceremony, such as the

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<sup>98</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/7547074.stm> (accessed 9 August 2008).

potential first medalist in the UK and China, as well as American swimming star Michael Phelps' quest of eight Olympic golds. The NYT's news story for the opening ceremony, "China's leaders try to impress and reassure world"<sup>99</sup>, seems to be the longest. The approximately 1500-word article, as revealed from the news headline, indeed says less about the opening ceremony itself, but more on the impact of the Olympics as to the Chinese society. Issues such as national pride, the boost to the economy, diplomatic strategy, the theme of the harmonious society, China's first bid for the Games and so on, were all included in this news story. In contrast, Chinese websites seemed to be less interested in covering that kind of "less relevant" information in their opening ceremony coverage. Hard news for the ceremony specifically focused on the ceremony itself, though viewers could still find the "less relevant" information somewhere else within the website.

In fact, the analysis above suggests two different journalistic values in Western and Chinese news online. There is a growing consensus in the West, especially in the US, that contemporary reporting has shifted to "deemphasize events in favor of news analysis" (Barnhurst and Mutz, 1997: 27) and that Western news is more likely to trace a "thematic news frame" (Iyengar, 1991), synthesizing various events and background information in a single piece of news. A content analysis of American newspapers, conducted by Barnhurst and Mutz, found that news stories "grew longer, included more analysis, expanded from specific locations to broader regions, placed more emphasis on time frames other than the present, and named fewer individuals and more groups, officials, and outside sources" (1997: 27). Such a trend has significantly influenced the Western news coverage online, since later research reveals that US newspapers on the internet "do not appear to reinvent themselves online" and "the web versions reproduce the substance of their print editions in a way that relates similarly to readers" (Barnhurst, 2002: 477). Barnhurst attributes the minimal change of the online version as a monopoly strategy of guarding their market position and

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<sup>99</sup> Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/09/sports/olympics/09china.html?ref=olympics> (accessed 9 August 2008).

erecting “a barrier to the entry of geographical competitors and ideological alternatives in the US news arena” (2002: 477).

The web news genre in China, pioneered by the portal sites, has shown dramatic interest in embracing the web’s attributes to a large extent and hence, Chinese news online values timeliness and comprehensiveness. The news contents mainly present an “episodic news frame”, focusing on not only a single event, but mostly a single dimension of an event (Iyengar, 1991). The episodic news frame is often on the basis of “sensational and emotional appeals” (Dudo et al., 2007: 434), while the thematic frame is helpful to present the relationships between issues and “societal and structural factors” (Nitz and West, 2004: 208). This is in line with previous findings from the analysis of the Olympic picture utilization: the sizeable pictures shown in various styles employed by Chinese websites play an important role of attention-attraction, while the modest presentation of pictures at the Western websites, the BBC in particular, displays the value placed on such matters as constructing cultural memory and public knowledge.

Under the episodic news frame and driven by the “sensational and emotional appeals”, it comes as no surprise that the Olympic section in Chinese websites was filled with a dramatic amount of human-interest news. Admittedly, quite a few are impressive, interesting, and valuable. Instances of this trend include Michael Phelps’ 12,000 calorie-a-day diet, German gymnastic Oksana Chusovitina’s<sup>100</sup> participation for her son, the weightlifter Matthias Steiner’s<sup>101</sup> special celebration for the gold medal. Nevertheless, there were a handful of news articles focusing too much on behind-the-scenes stories. The Chinese media, especially the web portals, were “intoxicated with champions’ privacies” during the Olympics, as an article from the China Dominant-Journalism Development Center (CDDC) pointed out (Zhang, 8 September 2008). Examples of this trend abound. A news headline for an Australian

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<sup>100</sup> Many websites reported that the German gymnastic, Oksana Chusovitina, who was a 33-year-old mother, competed in her fifth Olympics, as she needed money to cover her son’s medical treatment.

<sup>101</sup> Matthias Steiner of German, held a photo of his late wife as he celebrated his gold medal.

gold medalist was designed as “Though being gay, he gains respects too”.<sup>102</sup> A Chinese champion had a beautiful wife. Together with news on venues, there were dozens of stories about their romance. Pictures of the champion’s wife were posted by all popular news websites in China. As evident in previous discussion of the many behind-the-scenes stories in the blogosphere and the active interactivity, the portal sites saw great value in human-interest stories in drawing viewers into the site and making them active and sticky users. One of the most heated soft news items in China during the 2008 Olympics was about the shooting champion Guo Wenjun. The coverage of Guo’s personal suffering at losing contact with her father reached a pitch immediately after she gained the gold. Evoked by the touching news coverage—“Winning a gold medal could be the most effective “Missing Persons” notice”—some 100,000 internet users participated in the “search mission”. Active web reports, together with the enthusiastic help of netizens, meant many private secrets that embarrassed both Guo and her family were dug out. Another overly covered champion was Chinese diver Guo Jingjing, who won two gold medals at the 2008 Olympics. There were numerous headlines of her relationship with the grandson of a late Hong Kong business tycoon. Then with the catalyzer of the Olympic media alliances, discussed earlier, the eye catching news spread quickly and widely. To sum up, web media in China, on the one hand, were busy with regular news coverage of the Olympics, and on the other hand, showed a strong paparazzi tendency. As Zhang (8 September 2008) pointed out, a regular news coverage or interview with the champion and the champion’s family was usually considered as too ordinary to be published, since all the rival media would have a similar report. Therefore, the distinctiveness relies heavily on the exposure of privacy and secrets. Only in this way, could the media attract more eyeballs and thus earn more clicks. Zhang’s comment indicates the powerful market driving force in the Chinese internet media industry.

Furthermore, the pursuit of sensational and immediate news can sometimes result in plagiarism online. With the help of the convenience of the internet, journalists can

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<sup>102</sup> Available at: <http://2008.163.com/08/0823/23/4K2P0OVT007425U5.html> (accessed 18 August 2008).



“cut and paste” information online and then file stories easily. There is evidence that some journalists took full advantage of this attribute and quoted people they had never contacted, and described details they had never seen. In early May 2008, a few websites (e.g. NetEase, Sohu, and CCTV.com) posted a news story sourced from Huanqiu.com,<sup>103</sup> reporting that Guo Jingjing, the gold medalist mentioned above, was pregnant and was about to leave the national team. This fake news was copied and pasted onto a lot of Chinese websites. More absurdly, the origin of this news actually was from a BBS post in February 2005. The content of the fake news was exactly the same as the BBS post three years ago. Another popular fake news that was published by all the Chinese websites two weeks before the Beijing Olympics was about Bill Gates. It was reported that Mr. Gates had rented a traditional Chinese courtyard (Si Heyuan) at the price of RMB 100 million per year to watch the Olympics. The report had very detailed descriptions of how spectacular this apartment was, with views of both the Bird’s Nest and the Water Cube, as well as luxury decorations using top international brands. Later, this news was shown to be a rumour spread by the property agent, though the property agent denied it. However, only a few news websites (e.g. Sina) later removed the news item. Internet users could still find the above fake news in a variety of news websites at the time of my writing.<sup>104</sup> None of the websites updated the news by indicating the news story as fake. The commercial pressure tends to push Chinese web-based media to risk their reputation in gaining attention. Little has been discussed among academic about the ethical concern of plagiarism online, especially during the Games. The ever-increasing updates on the internet together with the festive atmosphere seemed to overwhelm any dissenting voices within Olympic news coverage.

This is in sharp contrast to the NYT’s bold “Correction Appended” notice. This form of being honest with the audience is a remarkable characteristic of NYT’s journalistic

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<sup>103</sup> Available at: <http://ent.huanqiu.com/top/2008-05/105922.html> (accessed 10 August 2008).

<sup>104</sup> The news about Bill Gates is available at, for example:  
<http://2008.163.com/08/0723/08/4HH8HP8R00742437.html>  
<http://sports.sohu.com/20080723/n258319080.shtml>  
[http://www.nmg.xinhuanet.com/wtyl/2008-07/23/content\\_13902791.htm](http://www.nmg.xinhuanet.com/wtyl/2008-07/23/content_13902791.htm) (accessed 25 May 2009).

practice. In the report “Unstoppable Bolt Breaks Record in 200-Meter, Too”,<sup>105</sup> there is a notice of “Correction Appended” in bold characters before the full news text continues. At the end of the report, the NYT indicates that the article has been revised to reflect the following correction: “An article on Thursday about Usain Bolt’s record-setting run in the 200 meters at the Beijing Olympics included erroneous distinction for...”. As discussed previously, one outstanding characteristic of web-based media is its manipulable nature. Though news can be edited easily and even unnoticeably on the web, the NYT opts to inform audience of its revisions if there is something wrong with previous coverage. According to my observation, even when there is a minor mistake in the caption, the NYT still puts a bold and prominent “Correction Appended” statement and explains the correction in detail at the end of the article. Compared to some websites’ covert revisions of errors, the NYT’s transparent practice lends credit to the brand, and also makes the NYT stand out from numerous competitor websites.

The two instances of Chinese news stories above also demonstrate another characteristic of Chinese web news: that news coverage usually remains unchanged after publishing. A common practice among Chinese news websites is to indicate posting time, rather than “last updated”, or a detailed “article history” as some Western websites do. Instead of revising the original text, Chinese websites prefer to post a new story to update the news, which might contribute to the huge number of news stories in Chinese websites and also reflects the websites’ pursuit of immediacy as discussed earlier. Moreover, the above two instances indeed lead to one more characteristic of Chinese text news for the Beijing Olympics—imprecise source indications. It is sometimes very difficult to trace back to the original source of the news. On the fake news of Bill Gates, Xinhuanet suggests its source as NetEase. However, NetEase points to newssc.org, while Sohu indicates its source as the *Morning Press of Chongqing*. Since none of the websites provides the name of the

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<sup>105</sup> Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/21/sports/olympics/21bolt.html> (accessed 22 August 2008).

coverage reporter or the precise web address of the source story, it is hard to know the actual origin of the news. It is conventional practice for mainstream news websites in China to indicate the source collectively as, for example, Sina Sport, Sohu Sport, Xinhua News Agency and cctv.com, rather than to name individual reporters. The different cultural traditions (collectivism vs. individualism) might contribute considerably to this difference, as analyzed earlier.

In terms of the source of news, the 2008 Olympic Games witnessed a steep rise in original news among the four Chinese web portals under analysis. As discussed in the literature review, scholars (e.g. Deuze, 1999, 2003) place strong emphasis on the importance of originality in online news. My study here finds that there was a huge amount of original news and features among the Chinese web portals. To date, it has been difficult to find any statistical reports or empirical studies describing the exact number of web generated news articles or the proportion of portals' original news during the 2008 Olympics. Nevertheless, according to my consistent observation of the four news portals in China, for at least the key news stories, such as gold moments, the breaking of records, opening and closing ceremonies and so on, each web portal contributed dozens of original news articles for each topic. Indeed, many traditional media in China shovelled and republished original coverage from the news portals. The finding here together with the previous discovery of large amounts of web-generated talk shows can be considered as quite significant, since before this point there was rather limited original news reporting on the portal sites, due to the restriction of reporting and interviewing rights for web portals, as discussed earlier. The 2008 Olympic Games is actually a valuable opportunity for facilitating the development of online news in the aspect of more original content. However, the advancement in terms of web-generated news coverage (hard news in particular) is largely dependent on Chinese media policies (e.g. interview or reporting rights that are granted to the portal sites for certain events), rather than solely due to the sites' own efforts. Further cases must be explored in order to test whether this is indeed a trend.

A close examination of web-generated news finds a number of problems existed in the Chinese coverage. Firstly, repetitions or overlaps in news coverage were widespread. Sometimes similar or even the same news was posted twice under different headlines in a short time period at the same news website. For example, two pieces of news about Russia defending its rhythmic gymnastics group title were nearly identical on Sohu. One was posted at 13:33 on 24 August entitled “Winning the gold medal in the rhythmic gymnastics group, Russian girls are excited to tears”,<sup>106</sup> and the other was posted at 14:04 under the headline of “Hard work assists Russians’ defense in rhythmic gymnastics, Elena Posevina: it’s a national honour”.<sup>107</sup> Only two sentences were different between the two articles. Then two QQ articles<sup>108</sup> about Lin Dan of China winning the Badminton Men’s Singles gold were exactly the same. One was posted five minutes after the other one and they were even given similar headlines. Secondly, original news is generally lacking in depth. Under a very prominent news headline, one may find only one or two sentences in the news content. Many news articles lacked a basic introduction to relevant background. The news about Lin Dan, as mentioned above, was composed of only one sentence. In addition, a handful of so-called “exclusive news” was not news at all. Many were written in a blog style, such as “now I’m standing next to...”. Furthermore, a majority of quotes employed by the portal sites were obtained indirectly or unclearly. The news reports utilized few quotes via interviews conducted by web portals’ reporters. It was more common that some quoted traditional media’s interviews and some handled the quotes vaguely by employing the formulaic frame of “someone says something in an interview”. Possible reasons for these mistakes are the tight time pressure during the Games and the immaturity of online journalism in China, as its practitioners are more used to shovelware and repurposed news content, as elaborated below.

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<sup>106</sup> Available at: <http://2008.sohu.com/20080824/n259172710.shtml> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>107</sup> Available at: <http://2008.sohu.com/20080824/n259172937.shtml> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>108</sup> Available at: <http://2008.qq.com/a/20080817/007842.htm>,  
<http://2008.qq.com/a/20080817/007814.htm> (accessed 19 August 2008).

Shovelware and repurposed news content were heavily employed by news websites in China. A considerable amount of unique content was constructed by blending a good many news articles from other media, be it online or offline. A regular practice was to shovel and mix coverage from portals' associated media organizations or from members of the Olympic Media Alliance. It is interesting to note that quite a few Chinese websites under analysis showed a strong interest in offering insight into how media, other than Chinese, reported the Olympics. With the help of the internet, media coverage worldwide is only a click away. The web-based media in China tend to take full advantage of this trait and have paid particular attention to global coverage. Examples of this trend are common. The news article "World media focus on Bolt's record-breaking: The most incredible flying man",<sup>109</sup> published by Sina Sport, briefly summarized news coverage provided by mainstream news websites in other countries. Together with quotations from the texts, a series of snapshots from various websites around the globe were displayed in this article, namely, websites of the Jamaica Information Service, NBC, the BBC, *Welt*, *L'EQUIPE*, TVNZ, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and KBS. More instances include use of the online NYT's coverage of the pictures of Phelps' narrow victory over Cavic, Liu Xiang's withdrawal from competition, Phelps' unusual diet, and news coverage of the opening and closing ceremonies by CNN, the BBC, NYT, and Reuters. To translate and then summarize other countries' coverage has become increasingly popular among Chinese websites. Such a practice might be a response to expectations within the Chinese audience. Information is highly desired by people in modernizing China and the audience desire domestic information "for making sense of the current situation of local society" and there is a demand for news from other countries "for seeing the difference and understanding their positions in the whole world" (Zeng, 2005: 19).

Further analysis on the media attention given to specific sports, nations, and athletes suggests that the coverage at Chinese news websites is generally less balanced than

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<sup>109</sup> Available at: <http://2008.sina.com.cn/zq/at/2008-08-16/2321216799.shtml> (accessed 17 August 2008).

the coverage in the US, UK and New Zealand. Two controversial news topics are employed as instances to explore this issue further. The news coverage of the official Olympic theme song “You and Me”, performed by Sarah Brightman and Liu Huan at the opening ceremony, attracted heated discussion in China. Chinese websites provided very detailed coverage of the theme song. QQ for example, had a specific subsection<sup>110</sup> showing profiles of the two singers, as well as previous Olympic theme songs. Pictures and related video were included in this section. A large number of Chinese internet users contributing to online forums voiced their disappointment about this song. Among thousands of comments on this song, the following were a few common ones: the song was short of passion; the lyrics were simplistic; it was easy to forget; it was good only as a lullaby; huge expectation was followed by enormous disappointment.<sup>111</sup> Despite the public criticism, news coverage in China was overwhelmingly positive in tone. All the researched Chinese websites posted the same news article under the headline, “Authoritative experts appreciate the theme song for the Beijing Olympics” [quan wei ren shi shang xi Beijing ao yun zhu ti qu].<sup>112</sup> Sourced from Xinhuanet, this news article included the voices of Zhang Heping (principal of the operating team of the opening and closing ceremony<sup>113</sup>), a well-known Chinese singer Li Shuangjiang, Chen Weiya (vice-director of the opening ceremony), Wang Pingjiu (chief of section at the Olympic Cultural Activity), and Jiang Xiaoyu (executive vice-president of the Beijing IOC). The general consensus from the above authoritative experts was that the song was beautiful, creative, amiable, surprisingly impressive and easy to be recalled. It seems that hard news on sensitive topics in Chinese websites favoured the voices of the powerful authorities over ordinary netizens. Similarly, other news concerning the Chinese authorities, such as congratulation letters and phone calls from the State Administration of Sport or the

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<sup>110</sup> The address for the subsection is: <http://2008.qq.com/zt/2008/olympicsong/index.htm> (accessed 20 August 2008).

<sup>111</sup> These comments are drawn from forums specifically for the related news, for example at <http://comment2.news.sohu.com/viewcomments.action?id=258693488>, <http://bbs.sports.163.com/bbs/dahua/90150647.html> (accessed 10 August 2008).

<sup>112</sup> Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/olympics/2008-08/08/content\\_9055740.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/olympics/2008-08/08/content_9055740.htm) (accessed 20 August 2008).

<sup>113</sup> The title(s) denote(s) the position people held at the time when the news covered.

speech of the Beijing IOC were usually put in very prominent places in large red characters. This phenomenon is particularly evident on the websites of Xinhuanet and CCTV. This trait echoes previous discussion on the role of Chinese web-based media. Though gaining much more freedom than traditional media, internet media in China are still under surveillance and still serve as part of the central organ of the government. Any negative voice, especially towards big events, is possibly shown in blogs, and online forums, but is usually excluded from the mainstream news. The finding here indicates that it would be too optimistic to declare that the internet media could greatly lessen government's ability of agenda setting, as suggested in the literature review.

The coverage of Chinese gymnasts' ages is another instance of lack of balance. This issue was in the limelight in the West, especially in the US, but gained little interest in Chinese media. Examining Western coverage of this issue, my study finds that no matter what the tone was, multiple voices could be found in various reports. At the beginning of the BBC news item, "Olympic probe into gymnasts' ages",<sup>114</sup> it is reported that "The BBC has seen an internet document... records... that would mean she [Kexin He, one of China's gymnast] is only 14." Nevertheless, the BBC also allows contrary voices from an IOC spokeswoman Giselle Davies, Wang Wei (executive vice-president of the Beijing Organizing Committee), Lu Shanzhen (chief coach of China's women's gymnastics team), and the International Gymnastics Federation. Moreover, this topic reached a fever pitch in the US, since the American team is a close rival of the Chinese team in women's gymnastics. Websites in the US had a large amount of news coverage around this issue. Looking at a few news reports from NYT.com, although the tone of the coverage clearly indicates that the newspaper's reporters believe the Chinese gymnast is under age, different voices were still included in the report. As shown in the article<sup>115</sup> published on 9 August 2008, the

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<sup>114</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/gymnastics/7575929.stm> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>27</sup> "Teeny-tiny matters of age for China's gymnasts", available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/sports/olympics/10age.html> (accessed 25 August 2008).

international gymnastics federation (known as FIG) said the Chinese were playing fair and IOC officials agreed. Moreover, this article also quotes Enrico Casella's (the coach of the Italian women's team) words that "there will always be rumors that athletes are too young. Looks could be deceiving. ... By looks, you could say that the United States is using doping. They are so muscular. My gymnasts in Italy aren't that big." Similarly, New Zealand websites also employed the strategy of enclosing multiple voices in covering this issue. Voices from both sides—an unnamed US computer expert, American media, as well as a FIG spokesman, the Chinese head coach, the gymnast He Kexin, and Games organizers BOGOC—can be found in TVNZ's news reports.<sup>116</sup> However, the practice in Chinese media was very different. As mentioned earlier, there was little coverage of this issue on the Chinese websites under analysis. The only news report that I can find is sourced from the website of China News. It has the title, "Cui Dalin: Chinese gymnasts' age completely complies with Olympic requirements",<sup>117</sup> which was posted on all Chinese websites studied here. In sharp contrast to the Western media's strategy of including multiple voices on this story, there was only one voice from a single source. It is reported that Cui Dalin, vice minister of the State General Administration of Sport, emphasized in a news conference that Chinese gymnasts' ages completely comply with requirements. The question of who is telling the truth is far beyond the interest of this research. The finding here reveals that multiple voices were muted over "sensitive" issues in Chinese cyberspace.

With regard to the depth and breadth of coverage of the major news topics, a distinctive characteristic of Chinese web journalism lies in the way the dual values of context and comprehensiveness are negotiated. If one examines each individual item of coverage for the important news at Chinese websites, one might be disappointed to

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<sup>116</sup> "Inquiry into Chinese gymnast's age", available at: <http://tvnz.co.nz/content/2027759> (accessed 25 August 2008).

<sup>117</sup> "Cui Dalin: Zhong guo ti cao yue dong yuan nian ling wan quan fu he ao yun gui ding", this article is available on every researched Chinese website, for example: <http://sports.163.com/08/0824/12/4K42DRAE0005227R.html>, <http://2008.sina.com.cn/cn/gym/2008-08-24/1158255673.shtml> (accessed 25 May 2009).



find that almost every news report was far from comprehensive when compared with news articles in Western websites. If one examines a series of news articles in Chinese websites holistically, one might be struck by the depth and breadth of Chinese news. For example, American swimmer, Michael Phelps, who grabbed eight gold medals plus seven world records in the 2008 Olympics, became a major news topic around the globe. Every Chinese website under analysis had a specific section for this high-profile figure. Focusing on Phelps' record-breaking eighth gold, Chinese reports comprised a series of short news articles. Each article covers only a small dimension of this topic, such as descriptions of the intense competition at the 4x100 medley, introductions to Phelps' team-mates, the voice of Phelps himself, the voice of Phelps' coach and so on. Therefore, almost none of the coverage alone can be considered as contributing to the depth or breadth of the news topic. Instead, detailed descriptions of competitions, introduction to schedules and all the participating teams can be found in the subsection for a particular competition or athlete. More precisely, it was likely that almost every dimension of the major news reported on Western websites was available at the themed subsections of the Chinese sites. In fact, Chinese websites usually provided much more details or many more dimensions for some heated topics in the 2008 Olympics than most of the Western websites. Chinese coverage of Liu Xiang (the defending Chinese champion in the men's 110 m hurdles who withdrew from the 2008 Games), Usain Bolt (champion of three golds), the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as of popular competitions was far more comprehensive than Western coverage.

This practice is in sharp contrast with Western websites' relatively comprehensive individual reports. Western news stories, often using a "thematic news frame" (as discussed earlier), usually contain more context and background information. Take the BBC's news article "Phelps wins historic eighth gold"<sup>118</sup> as an example. This article mentions Phelps' team-mates at the very beginning as well as other teams, such as

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<sup>118</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/swimming/7566088.stm> (accessed 18 August 2008).

Australia, Japan and of course Britain. Then there is a brief introduction to Phelps' previous seven golds. The voices of Phelps, his team-mate Peirsol, and Australian swimmer Hackett were also included in this news item. At the beginning of its reports, instead of overwhelmingly focusing on the champion, the BBC typically mentions other competitors, at least the second and the third top competitors in the event. For example, in the news report "Bolt surges to gold in new record",<sup>119</sup> the BBC reports that: "Richard Thompson of Trinidad and Tobago was second while American Walter Dix came third but they were well adrift." The coverage of "Bolt grabs third gold and record"<sup>120</sup> on 22 August goes: "Nesta Carter ran a strong first leg before passing the baton to Michael Frater, who handed on to Bolt before Asafa Powell brought it home. Trinidad and Tobago took silver with Japan coming home for bronze." Similarly, the NYT's coverage, titled "Eight for Phelps",<sup>121</sup> also covered team members, the silver and bronze medalists as well as Phelps' previous feats. Instead of overwhelmingly focusing on Phelps himself, NYT's news tends to be distinctive by highlighting some of NBC's interview with Mark Andrew Spitz, who won seven gold medals at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games.

## 5.6 Chapter summary

The case study of online news coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games uncovers a wealth of differences between Chinese and Western mainstream news websites. The distinctive characteristics of Chinese web journalism are evident throughout the analysis. Chinese mainstream media online differ from their Western counterparts in terms of journalistic logics, journalistic values and journalistic traditions. The four phases of study, including analysis of multimediality (graphic, audio-video and multimedia news packages), interactivity (inactive, active and highly active interactivity), hypertextuality (hyperlinks and hypertexts), and textual news, have

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<sup>119</sup> Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/athletics/7565203.stm> (accessed 24 August 2008).

<sup>120</sup> Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/athletics/7576737.stm> (accessed 24 August 2008).

<sup>121</sup> Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/17/sports/olympics/17phelpsweb.html> (accessed 18 August 2008).

presented some of these differences in detail.

In terms of graphic content, the value of news images has been applied differently. Within Chinese websites, the impact of photos and graphics is largely invoked as an impetus for compelling the audience's attention. Websites employed a dramatically large number of pictures to highlight the importance of the Olympic Games. Chinese red was widely employed to connote festive viewing; the photo subsection was given a unique web address; high definition images, full-screen views, and interactive slide shows were offered extensively; and medal-related as well as human-interest discourse dominated the picture theme. In contrast, the Western tactic of picture utilization is in accordance with Zelizer's notions on news images. News images are "used as pegs not to specific events but to stories larger than can be told in a simple news items" (Zelizer, 2005: 28). Accordingly, news pictures are rigorously selected to be "composite, more schematic than detailed, conventionalized, and simplified" (Zelizer, 2005: 28). The Olympic case witnessed a modest use of graphics along these lines among Western websites under study.

With regard to the audio-video coverage, the opportunities of webcasting celebrated in the web journalism literature, including live streams and video-on-demand, or original, repurposed and simulcast video, have been widely incorporated by news websites in China. Video that was rarely before shown online, such as Olympic sporting footage and opening and closing ceremonies, was displayed both live and on-demand at Chinese news websites. In sharp contrast to some Western sites' strategies of saving some video for television on prime time, Chinese websites saved nothing for traditional media. Moreover, there was a large amount of web-generated video of interviews, commentaries, and talk shows. Much of the web-only video deliberately followed a "You Tube" style that emphasized an informal atmosphere, less editing and a heavy orientation towards entertainment, so as to differentiate it from "professional" television broadcasting. It should be noted that the commercial pressure together with the intensively competitive atmosphere of the Chinese online

market during the Olympics, as discussed at many points, has contributed heavily to the flourishing of web-generated video content. It is doubtful whether such an original trend would continue to thrive, given the requirements of intensive labour and financial support for the video creation. In other words, it is imperative to examine the generalization of the original feature, with the help of another case study.

As to multimedia news packages, this study discovered only a few instances of well-integrated multimedia content for news stories at Chinese websites. Many news packages are mere technical or format combinations, which belong to the archetype of “superficial multimediality” (Deuze, 2003). Such multimedia packages play a weak role in providing “additional ways to understand information, extending coverage and heightening the users’ experience in taking in a story” (Zerba, 2004: 17). In most cases, the multimedia content was just a replica of news in texts. Moreover, driven by the promotion logic, Chinese textual news was surrounded by multimedia hyperlinks paving the road to other attractive pages, rather than digging deeply into the news topic or providing breadth. Interestingly, well-organized multimedia packages were often presented within commentaries, backgrounds and feature stories. Chinese websites creatively invented the multimedia “virtual museum” and themed sections to recap or analyze the Games. “Play” (as theorized in Ha and James, 1998) seems to be threaded through the use of multimedia packages at Chinese websites. Rather than being just information, the multimedia packages are in fact “play for the audience”, contributing to a promotion of socialization in the process of playing (Ha and James, 1998). The much discussed role of “smooth navigation” (King, 1998; Bardoel, 1996; Kawamoto, 2003, Väliäho and Lundgren, 2005) is less evident in Chinese cyberspace. The multimedia contents at Chinese websites play a weak role of guiding users’ navigation. The assumption that multimedia journalism online is a good way to avoid audience getting lost in the sea of information (Bardoel, 1996) seems difficult to apply to the Chinese situation. On the contrary, there is an emphasis on making the “sea” bigger by employing less-relevant or irrelevant multimedia elements at Chinese websites.

The study of interactive features of news websites has delivered fruitful findings to support the key contention of this thesis that Chinese web journalism has developed in a way that differs from the Anglo-American web journalism, owing to the different economic, social and cultural contexts. My study finds that Chinese mainstream websites are less likely to utilize inactive interactivity features, while they are more likely to employ active and highly active interactivity features than Anglo-American websites. Chinese websites offered fewer functional inactive options when compared with that of Anglo-American websites. In particular, devices for monitoring information use, such as RSS, customization, and social bookmarking links, are not favoured at the Chinese websites studied here, but are widely employed among the Western websites. Such a difference can be largely explained in terms of the different structure of news websites and the different journalistic logics. Chinese mainstream news websites, especially the portal sites, have led the development of interactive features in Chinese cyberspace. As introduced in the background chapter, many of the portal sites were first social networks or social software providers before being news providers, thus these sites are able to incorporate a handful of networking features, such as platforms for users to post blogs, podcasts, discussion, comments and so on. Instead of guiding users to other networking sites via RSS and social bookmarking links, Chinese sites preferred to keep netizens' networking within their own domains. However, in the West, news websites were conservative in providing those platforms at their own sites, due to "doubts about the editorial and commercial value of material from the public" and "editors' persistent concerns about reputation, trust, legal liabilities" (Hermida and Thurman, 2008: 343). The Western websites under study employed more social network and bookmarking links to guide viewers to other providers, so that the news organizations become prominent on the social web.

The different journalistic logics in utilizing these networking devices significantly influenced the application of active interactivity features. The study finds that Chinese news websites more actively encourage users' contributions and participation via

blogs, podcasts, discussion forums, chat rooms, and mini-games. Compared with their Western counterparts, the online chat rooms, Olympic blogs and discussion forums at Chinese websites were larger, more diverse in content, and more playful as well as highly commercial in style. The dominance of a portal logic has greatly driven the development of the Chinese mainstream news websites, including both the portal sites and the websites of CCTV and Xinhuanet, to warmly embrace Web 2.0 features to facilitate internet users' communication. The Chinese netizens' blogs, as in this case, are more prominent than journalists' blogs, which contrast with the dominance of journalists' blogs at Western websites. The podcast was applied in completely different ways. Chinese websites emphasized amateurs' contributions to podcasts, whereas Western websites underscored the convenience of podcasts to listen to or to watch professionally made content. Online forums at Chinese sites showed openness and diversity in terms of contents, and displayed attractive and user-friendly interfaces. The conducting (or monitoring) of synchronous chat rooms by online hosts demonstrated an effective form of interactive communication between news professionals and news consumers. The particular emphasis on the use of games and other curiosity-arousal tactics reveals that in China the line between serious web use (e.g. web news) and play is less pronounced than in the West. All in all, the study of active interactivity features is in line with the content analysis conducted by Hong et al. (2008) who proposed the active-and-inactive model. By comparing the Korean online newspaper with the American online newspaper, Hong et al. concluded that "Korean online newspapers are more actively involved in networking or maintaining online users' relationships using active interactivity content such as discussion forums, chat rooms and communities" (2008: 509). My study here indicates a similar trend of how Chinese mainstream news websites employ active interactivity devices. The cultural differences, as Hong et al. (2008) suggest, are the main contributing factors to the differences in this regard. People in collectivistic culture (e.g. China, Korea) are more likely than those in noncollectivistic culture (e.g. Anglo-American countries) to pay attention to the importance of personal relationships and to build and maintain those relationships between and among members (Hall, 1976).

Moreover, I propose to add to Hong et al.'s (2008) model the concept of highly active interactivity to describe an emerging trend in Chinese websites' effort in facilitating offline activities. The highly active interactivity is a distinctive feature of Chinese websites. By organizing or sponsoring netizens' offline activities, Chinese websites have shown an increasing interest in providing opportunities for netizens to have face-to-face communication. Such a feature is, most likely, closely related to websites' marketing strategies. By taking advantage of the Beijing Olympics, Chinese websites tried every means to attract viewers and advertise their brands. It is possible that the highly active interactivity feature is case-specific. Only when the news event is significant and suitable for organizing offline activities, would the online media invest money and resources to facilitate face-to-face human interaction. The second case study is helpful to testify whether this is a common feature within Chinese mainstream news websites.

Concerning numerous theoretical accounts and empirical studies on the interactivity of news websites, my study here has delivered fruitful findings to either confirm or challenge previous discoveries. First of all, this phase of study suggests that to divide interactive features into inactive, active and highly active is a very useful means to conduct the comparative analysis of websites originated from different social and cultural contexts. Classification of features must be done with sensitivity or those contexts to enable comparison. Secondly, Heeter's (1989) six-dimensional construct of interactivity, though proposed more than 20 years ago, is still valid in today's Web 2.0 era. My research here has confirmed its well-defined explication and practical nature. Thirdly, I agree with Ha and James (1998) that "playfulness" is an important additional dimension of interactivity. It is particularly true in Chinese cyberspace, as evident from the analysis above. The interactivity at Chinese websites can be seen in a business setting as the "combination of rich content, active intelligence, collaborative communications to create a compelling consumer experience" (Robb et al., 1997: 5). The findings on the active and highly active interactivity features of Chinese websites

indeed lend credence to Tai's proposition that "although the Internet serves for most of its users and on many occasions as a venue for information, much of its transformative power lies in its ability to act as a social space where people gather, interact, gossip, banter, play games, and do many more things that groups do" (2006: 165).

The analysis of the hypertextuality of news websites indicates different journalistic values of Chinese and Western online media. There were far more hyperlinks at the front pages of the Chinese Olympic in-depth sections, which suggests that Chinese websites emphasize comprehensiveness and are less selective in news content, while Western websites value the elite and tend to have "a deliberate reduction" of news elements (Quandt, 2008). Moreover, Chinese websites value news variation more than news depth. Largely driven by the tactic of promotion, hyperlinks at Chinese news web pages often take the viewer further through the site, rather than deeper into the story. In contrast, Western websites reveal a logic of "drilling down" that equips viewers with a selection of related headlines to reach into the news in ever greater depth. Furthermore, the use of both hyperlinks and hypertexts in the Chinese sites contributes to a blurring of the line between editorial and commercial content in Chinese web news. News websites took advantage of hyper-linking to promote their sponsors, embed advertisements, and infuse various commercial elements. The Western websites under study seemed to pay much more attention to maintaining a clear distinction between editorial and commercial materials. Advertisements are clearly indicated, such as "ads by Google". A tabloid trend in Chinese news websites is actually evident through this phase of study.

More importantly, the potential of hypertextuality in web journalism is by and large insufficiently explored. In terms of context provision, the fashion towards a "self-conscious" hypertextuality and "seamless intertextuality", as Mitra and Cohen (1999) envisioned, is not at all clear in all of the websites under study, except the NYT and NBC. Chinese websites offered very limited hypertexts within news stories;



websites from the UK and New Zealand did not favour the use of any hypertexts within the news coverage. Concerning the use of internal and external hypertexts, the study here stands with a good many empirical findings (Tankard and Ban, 1998; Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000; Halavais, 2000; Dueze, 2001; Tremayne, 2005; Quandt, 2008) in concluding that journalism on the web is far from “worldwide”. All the websites under analysis made heavy use of internal links, leaving external links underdeveloped. The commercial concern has had considerable effect in driving Chinese websites to employ hyperlinking strategically to keep viewers within the website. The Olympic Coverage Alliances constructed by two groups of web media shaped the use of hypertextuality in a contradictory way—a contemporary interconnected landscape among members in the same alliance and absolute disconnect among media of different alliances. Being the organ of the Chinese authorities, the websites of CCTV and Xinhuanet were granted premier resources and their unshakable status protected them from the intense competition. They had no links to other websites, but all the other websites under analysis had links to them, as they are crucial news feeders in China. This phase of analysis suggests that the internet’s potential is renegotiated in quite complex ways within the commercial structure and the media system in China.

Finally, by focusing on textual news reports of the Olympics, the research finds a good many variations between Chinese and Western coverage online. The web news genre in China, pioneered by the portal sites, has shown dramatic interest in embracing certain of the web’s attributes to a large extent. In pursuit of immediacy and timeliness, news stories at Chinese websites are by and large shorter and chunkier, when compared with their Western counterparts. An “episodic news frame” (Iyengar, 1991) that focuses on a single dimension of an event dominates Chinese news reports. Such a news frame has contributed to a distinctive characteristic of Chinese web journalism—the dual level of context and comprehensiveness. Individual news coverage offers little context and is far from comprehensive, while a series of news articles enclosed in a themed section or in-depth section would greatly help with the

depth and breadth. Instead of replacing the old stories, Chinese journalists accumulate news articles, which leads to a dramatically high number of news stories at Chinese websites. In contrast, the textual news at Western websites, especially at the NYT, differs little from their print news. Timeliness seems not as urgent. Western news content studied here was not updated as often as Chinese content. The NYT only denotes publishing dates, which reveals its newspaper tradition. The news article at Western sites is relatively long, synthesizing various events and background information in a single piece of news. A “thematic news frame” (Iyengar, 1991) is evident from Western news content. The differences above might be closely related to the difference between portals and media organizations. Undeniably, the stature of the portals in China has overwhelmingly influenced Chinese journalistic practice online. The news websites of CCTV and Xinhuanet also reveal a similar style.

Additionally, the Olympic case was witness to a steep rise in the amount of original news content at Chinese mainstream news websites, which can be seen as a (possibly temporary) breakthrough of journalistic practice online. As mentioned earlier, during the Beijing Olympics, the authorities loosened restrictions on reporting and interviewing rights for the main portal sites in China, which contributed greatly to the growth of original news online. It reveals a fact that the newness or originality of web news in China (hard news in particular) is largely dependent on external factors (e.g. state policies), rather than solely on the online media’s own effort. Such a finding has lent further credit to the contention here that the specific media context has shaped the development of Chinese web journalism. Furthermore, concerning the content of web-generated textual news, my analysis finds an entrepreneurial and freedom oriented style shown within Chinese news coverage. This style resembles the style of blogs, indicating “informality, subjectivity and eyewitness experience” that “cuts across the fundamentals of ostensibly impartial news reporting” (Matheson and Allan, 2007: 75). Mainstream journalists in the West usually cautiously avoid such a trend in their online news coverage, since it contradicts with the Western journalistic value of elite content that emphasizes edited, professional and organized news.

To summarize, this case study has found quite a few distinctive characteristics to the Chinese web news genre. National-specific elements are quite prominent at Chinese mainstream news websites. A number of commercial, organizational, social and cultural factors contribute to shaping Chinese web journalism in a way that contradicts the notion of a homogeneous worldwide journalism or of a single set of norms for journalism. The high-profile Olympic Games have offered a valuable opportunity for comparative study of the journalistic practice around the globe, as a heavy emphasis was devoted to the Olympic coverage via prominent placement, in-depth coverage, and around-the-clock updating. Media organizations see the Olympics as a valuable chance to showcase the talent of their employers and thus to attract more audience as well as larger online market. The news event offers news organizations with an opportunity to “test new styles”, to “embark on technical experimentation” and sometimes, even to “redefine the rule of journalism” (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 194). Admittedly, the Beijing Olympic case might have presented the most dramatic online journalistic practice, especially in Chinese cyberspace. Some of the findings above may be unique to the Olympic case. Therefore, the second case study would be able to assist reaching a more generalizable conclusion by identifying the overall characteristic and the case-specific characteristic of Chinese web journalism.

## 6. Case study of H1N1 influenza Pandemic

### 6.1 Introduction

The second case study examines in-depth news sections on the H1N1 influenza pandemic (also known as swine flu) in 2009. The reason for analyzing this case can be explained mainly on two grounds. Firstly, the dramatic global influence makes this pandemic a significant news event that falls into the criteria of this research project. Secondly, the considerable differences between the two cases, influenza and the Olympic Games, will help to assist the exploratory multiple-case study to deliver a more generalizable conclusion. The A H1N1 virus was first detected in Mexico in April 2009 and has since spread to countries worldwide. It was the first worldwide pandemic designation declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 41 years. Chan, the Director-General of the WHO, stated that “influenza pandemics, whether moderate or severe, are remarkable events because of the almost universal susceptibility of the world’s population to infection” (WHO, 11 June 2009). Owing to its high news value, many news websites set up in-depth news sections on swine flu and thus offer an opportunity for media researchers to closely examine the online journalistic practice in this regard. The time frame for this study covered the climax of this event, which was from 11 June 2009 to 16 July 2009. As of June 11, nearly 30,000 confirmed cases had been reported in 74 countries and the WHO declared the outbreak of the swine flu a global pandemic on that day (WHO, 11 June 2009). As the numbers of swine flu cases grew steeply, the WHO announced on 16 July 2009 that it had decided to stop tracking swine flu cases around the world, since it had become extremely difficult for countries to try to confirm every case through laboratory testing. Across this 36 day period, news websites had numerous updates concerning

the pandemic.

As discussed in the chapter on theory and method, the key principle of multiple case studies is to follow a replication logic in the research design. Therefore, in parallel to the method of the case study of the Beijing Olympics, in-depth sections of mainstream news websites in China, the US, UK and New Zealand are still the focus for the second case study. Chinese news websites under analysis are exactly the same as examined in the Olympic case study, including the websites of CCTV, Xinhuanet, and the four portal sites. The sampled Anglo-American news websites consist of the websites of the *New York Times*, NBC, the BBC, the *Guardian*, and the *New Zealand Herald*, which is almost the same set as studied in the first case study, except for the absence of TVNZ. Although providing a series of news coverage on swine flu, the website of TVNZ did not offer an in-depth section for swine flu coverage. Thus it was excluded from this case study focusing on in-depth news sections. Given the fact that the Anglo-American news websites share many common traits, as evident from the first case study, and the five sampled sites are representative in the three countries, the comparison between Chinese and Western web journalism is nevertheless feasible.

## 6.2 Multimediality

As in the research design for the first case, the study on multimediality of mainstream web news of swine flu focuses on both minor components of multimedia news content, such as graphics, photos, animations, audio and video, and the multimedia packages that comprise these multimedia elements. Particular attention is devoted to explore whether the findings drawn from the Olympic case hold water in this case. Issues that merited analyzing in this case include the role of news images (Zelizer, 2005), the originality of multimedia content (Deuze, 2003), the use of shovelware and repurposed material (Schultz, 1999; Kenny et al., 2000), the remediation of new media (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), and the function of multimedia news packages online (Kawamoto, 2003; Zerba, 2004; Stabe, 2007). Analysis of the flu coverage here

helps to single out characteristics that belonged more to the Olympic event than to web journalism and thus to convey more generalizable conclusions.

### 6.2.1 The use of pictures and graphics

Echoing the findings of the Olympic case, this stage of study finds that images were mostly employed by Chinese websites as an indicator of the importance of the news event as well as an impetus for compelling viewers' attention, whereas pictures and graphics at Western websites were displayed in a modest way and were largely incorporated within news stories to reflect the situation at large. The top banner design is again a prominent example to visualize this difference. As shown below, the contrast between Chinese and Western websites in terms of top banner design is apparent.

Examples of top banners at in-depth sections under study<sup>122</sup>:

CCTV:



Xinhuanet:



NetEase:

<sup>122</sup> The snapshots of top banners were taken on 12 June 2009, the second day of the research period. There were no dramatic changes of the top banner design during the 36-day study, thus the snapshots can be regarded as typical indicators.



QQ:



Sohu:



Sina:



BBC:



NBC:

## The Swine Flu Outbreak

Of the five Western in-depth sections under study, only two websites, the BBC and NBC, utilized a small graphic in the top banner; the other three websites employed plain textual banners without any graphics. In China, all of the flu sections under study employed heavily illustrated banners, incorporating sensational graphics (full of hygiene masks) and bold characters to highlight the potential risk of the pandemic. The findings here are in line with the finding of the Olympic case and suggest that the heavy top banner design is a fashion of Chinese web journalism that values vividness. Websites use graphics to reflect the importance of the event. The colorful banner of Olympic sections connotes a festive viewing for the audience and the graphic banner of flu sections indicates a severe epidemic situation. If judged from Western journalistic principles, the top banner design is far from professional, since it is subjective and promotes sensationalism. In Western culture, “objectivity is the best goal”, as it values reason, individual rights and science and technology (Mongerson, 1997: 50). However, the slightly “subjective” practice is not as much an issue in China. In fact, style and content are not strictly separated out in Chinese traditions of presentation. Internet users in China have long been used to the heavy graphic presentation of news websites, thus the seemingly sensational effect on the Western viewer might not have a similar effect on the Chinese viewer.

Compared with the image utilization of Western websites, there is a heavier use of graphics among Chinese news websites, as there was also in the Olympic case study. Different journalistic logics are indeed driving the different practices here. In China, graphics were used as pegs to the specific event, which contrasts with Zelizer’s statement that images are used “as pegs not to specific events but to stories” (2005: 28). In this case, pictures were employed to visualize as much risk-related information as possible in order to inform a large audience base and to impel public attention to the influenza. All of the Chinese in-depth sections studied here employed pictures and



graphics to exhibit “risk-magnitude information”, “risk-comparison information” and contents that promoted “self-efficacy”. For example, interactive maps illustrating the spread of swine flu across China, spreadsheets presenting the confirmed cases and the death toll country by country, sizeable charts comparing swine flu with normal flu, avian flu and SARS, diagrams detailing the alerting levels, as well as animations and interactive graphics showing symptoms and protection tips were available at the front page of Chinese in-depth sections.

Examples of graphic information on swine flu:

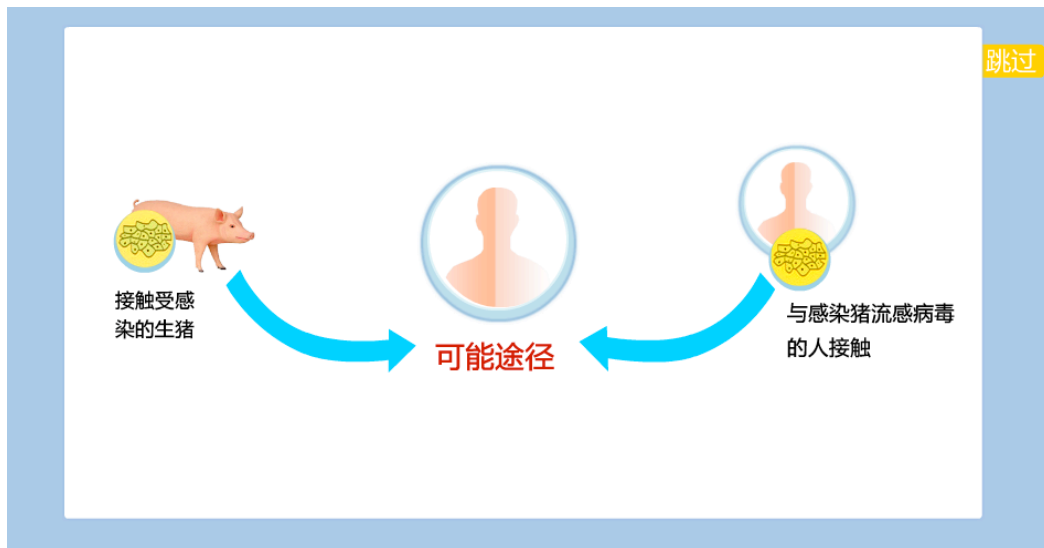
The spread of swine flu around the globe at NetEase:



The protection tips at Sina:



Animations of possible infective means at Sohu:



It is evident that Chinese news websites endeavoured to simplify and underline the risk information by visualizing as much content as they could. This practice contrasts with Western practice that uses pictures to depict stories “larger than can be told in a simple news item” (Zelizer, 2005: 28). My close examination finds that Western

in-depth sections on swine flu were overwhelmingly dominated by textual content. The pandemic sections in the West employed limited graphics for “risk-comparison information” and content that promoted “self-efficacy”. Comparisons between swine flu and ordinary or seasonal flu, symptoms, treatments, and ways to protect oneself were mostly explained in texts at the five Western websites. Graphics were largely utilized to illustrate the risk-magnitude information that might be more direct with the help of maps. Except for the website of the *NZHerald*, all the Western websites made use of interactive maps to track the infections around the world.

As to risk-magnitude information, Roche and Muskavitch (2003) claim that only quantitative risk information with a contextual denominator (e.g. 3 of 30 died or 3 of 3 million died) facilitates informed and rational decision-making. My close examination finds that Chinese and British websites generally paid particular attention to this aspect. During the research period, there was no death of swine flu in China. Thus, the chart and table usually displayed confirmed cases together with recovered cases in China as well as confirmed cases together with death tolls country by country. The BBC followed a similar trend in presenting the spread globally. The Guardian possessed more detailed information, incorporating various contextual denominators, such as daily and weekly rate per 100,000 populations, changes over weeks, infection rate per million people, deaths per million population. The *NZHerald* did not employ any graphic to show “risk-magnitude information” and the *NYT* itself did not have such graphics but referred viewers to authoritative websites for related information. NBC’s maps that indicated swine flu infections have performed poorly in terms of “quality risk information”. The two maps there were dominated by partial qualitative information and quantitative information without contextual denominators. For example, the global map only had qualitative information for a few countries such as the US, Mexico, Brazil, and left a number of countries (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, Canada and China) uncovered. The national map indicated the pandemic status of, for example, New York as “H1N1-related deaths: 7” and failed to offer any contextual information, such as the number of infections or the population of New York city.

Echoing the findings from the Olympic case study, all of the Chinese websites studied here had specific photo subsections for the influenza coverage, while none of the Anglo-American websites under analysis had a separate photo category. High definition pictures, interactive graphics and slide shows under various topics were available at Chinese photo sections. In contrast, Western websites presented pictures in a modest way. News images were often utilized as complements to the textual news story and the flu section contained only one or two slide shows. This difference has again proved the different journalistic cultures—one embraces photo coverage as a crucial part to achieve vividness and comprehensiveness, whereas the other is much more selective in line with notions of editorial expertise. The practice here reflects different values in relation to news images—one illustrates the text with a graphic example, and the other indexes the news text as about reality (Zelizer, 2005), though the overall logic of images is to represent the real.

Other distinctive characteristics of Chinese web journalism that had been discussed in the Olympic case study were also evident here, for example, the hierarchical structure with detailed divisions of photo subsection, a large number of pictures, the general absence of clear source indication, and so on. These findings suggest that the high use of images was a journalistic tradition in China and was not just because the Olympics was a visual event. A noticeable change—and improvement—of Chinese websites lies in the caption design. As mentioned in the first case study, many Olympic pictures at Chinese websites lacked proper captions and photos in galleries or slide shows usually shared the same caption. This phenomenon was rarely seen in this second case study. Pictures at the pandemic news section were accompanied with detailed captions, as they were at most Western websites. This suggests that the harsh competition of the Chinese online media as well as the substantial amount of information during the Beijing Olympics might have given rise to a prioritizing of quantity over quality. The particular emphasis on timely coverage had pushed Chinese journalists' practice more towards quantity. In the pandemic case, journalists seemed to have more time to

process information.

Compared with the Olympic case study, Chinese online coverage in the case of influenza was more international in outlook. In contrast to the finding in the Olympic case study that photos of national athletes dominated the in-depth section in China, this case study has found a large amount of photo coverage concerning the spread of the pandemic worldwide. For example, websites such as NetEase, CCTV and Sohu had a series of slideshows covering the status of the pandemic in every corner of the world. Similarly, many front pages of the global press coverage on the influenza were collected and displayed at the website of Sina, as shown below.

The front pages of press worldwide at Sina:



Such a global outlook can be largely explained in terms of the specific nature of the influenza, since it originated in Mexico and was widespread in the West during the

time of the study. Therefore, external coverage of the pandemic tends to be an important part of online news in China.

More importantly, compared with Western websites, Chinese online media are more likely to make use of the convenience of the World Wide Web to display the Western mainstream coverage online. Due to various constraints, Western news coverage was once hard to reach. By taking advantage of the internet, Chinese news websites seem to have taken a particular interest in presenting how the Western media report events, as will be more evident in the analysis of textual news below. Moreover, news websites, especially the web portals, have very few journalists of their own and thus are more reliant on the web content from elsewhere. In contrast, the online media in the West tend to rarely display how the Chinese media cover news events. As Paterson (2004) discovers, the online news world (in the English language) is leading to less international news. News websites assume people can go elsewhere and would rely on feeds from four organizations (Reuters, AP, AFP, and the BBC) to put a little international reporting on the side of their domestic web news.

Despite the global outlook that these snapshots present, it should be noted that the informational content within the display of “global press covers” was rather low. Due to the language barrier, it is not easy for Chinese viewers to follow Western coverage, as most Chinese websites failed to translate each snapshot in length. Thus the simple display of the front page in English, Spanish, and French for example, lends little help for Chinese viewers to comprehend the global coverage. The slide show of front pages worldwide only opens a window for Chinese audience to have a rough idea of the news coverage in other countries. More seriously, the slide show may be at risk of being sensationalist by displaying dramatic images of disease from around the world and lacking proper contextual information. This question of the global dimension to reporting will be analyzed further in relation to textual news.

## 6.2.2 The use of audio and video

The analysis of in-depth sections on H1N1 influenza reveals a general decline in the use of audio and video coverage, compared to the Olympic coverage. With regard to the audio coverage, none of the Chinese websites under study utilized any audio clips and only two Western websites, namely, the BBC and the NYT, employed a small number of audio items. Concerning the relatively small amount of audio coverage at the Olympic in-depth sections, a general rule of thumb can be discerned that mainstream news websites generally prefer video streams to audio clips. As shown in the pandemic case here, this is particularly true within the Chinese online journalistic sphere. The dominance of the stand-alone audio model in Chinese cyberspace (in contrast with the BBC's model of embedding audio clips into textual news) and a lack of compelling original content probably mostly explains this general absence of audio content in the pandemic news sections. In terms of the video coverage, all of the Chinese websites studied here had specific video sections for the influenza coverage, but offered far fewer video items than their Olympic sections. The web-generated video content that was occasionally shown in the Olympic in-depth section was not favoured here. Instead, Chinese websites under analysis were dominated by a large amount of video coverage generated by local and central television stations. The close cooperation between news websites and traditional media was evident from both case studies. The web portals, in particular, have long-term agreements with a good many television stations and shovelware seems to be the main source of video coverage. Partly an economic imperative underpins this. It is obviously cheaper for them to pay an agency or traditional media organization an annual fee to cover the world than do it themselves.

As with the Olympics, there was no major difference among the six Chinese websites in the number of video items, whereas the difference among the Western websites in this regard is as obvious as shown in the Olympic case. Online affiliates of broadcasting media possessed far more video items than online affiliates of the press. In contrast to the considerable number of video streams at the BBC and NBC, the in-depth section of the Guardian had very limited video coverage for the influenza

and the section of the NZHerald presented not a single video clip. The website of the NYT is slightly different. During the sample period (11 June—16 July), the NYT created absolutely no video content relating to the H1N1 virus. Before June, the NYT displayed sporadic video items by employing a small amount of NBC video and referring viewers to authoritative external sites (e.g. The White House, US Dept of Health & Human Services, etc.) for video coverage, such as the President’s address on actions on the H1N1 virus and the state health centre’s updates about the current status of the outbreak.

This stage of analysis focuses on video content, since none of the Chinese websites under study possessed any audio coverage on the H1N1 influenza. Here it is found that different media discourses were shown in the video coverage across the sample period—the discourse of sounding the alarm dominated the Chinese coverage while the discourse of reassurance was most prominent in the Western coverage. As discussed in the literature review, news content concerning themes of the rapid spread of the virus, extensive coverage of deaths, quarantine status, high level of alarm, and massive numbers of infected or deaths predicted by health authorities are identified as belonging to the discourse of sounding the alarm or warning of a threat (Ungar, 2008). There were a large number of video items in Chinese websites demonstrating the above themes. For example, the H1N1 influenza section of CCTV.com had a total of 33 video items and 20 of them fell under the above themes. Of the total of 93 video items at Xinhuanet’s H1N1 news section, 58 video clips focused on threat-warning. 78 out of 131 video items at Sina’s in-depth section were about the risk and threat of the H1N1 virus. Moreover, fearful claims took centre stage in the Chinese in-depth sections. Video content on swine flu was dominated by words loaded with emotional significance, such as “lethal”, “deadly”, “severe”, “killer”, “panic”, and “urging”, as well as loaded phrases, such as “huge death toll”, “extraordinary measures”, “out of control”, “explosive surge”, “make a daily record” and so on.<sup>123</sup> As discussed in the literature, the emphasis and placement of loaded words and phrases were closely

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<sup>123</sup> These items were translated from the Chinese by the author.



related to sensationalism in news stories (Friedman et al., 1987; Dudo et al., 2007) and thus strengthened a risk-warning discourse. However, it should be noted that the use of “sensational” words and phrases is a tradition in Chinese journalism, as was also evident in the Olympic case. The seemingly sensational effect on the Western viewer might not be the same for Chinese viewers, who have been used to the heavy use of “sensational” words in the news. Further discussion on this issue will be presented in the analysis below on textual news content.

Compared with Chinese video coverage, the discourse of warning about a threat was noticeably weaker in Western web journalism and the dominant discourse of video coverage shown within the sample tended to be one of reassurance. There were far fewer video items on swine flu at Western news websites. Of the 14 swine flu-related video items at the BBC, only 5 clips concerned the alarm themes listed above. Within the 5 alarm-sounding video items, there was an apparent effort to defuse frightening elements of the alarming-sounding news. For example, the video released on 11 June is about the WHO announcement that a “swine flu pandemic is confirmed”.<sup>124</sup> As well as covering the question of the global pandemic, the video accompanied this was statements that there was good reason to believe it would be of moderate severity in its early days, as the Director General of the WHO had also added. Similarly, in the video clip, “The first UK swine flu fatality”,<sup>125</sup> the Scottish government reveals that the patient had underlying health problems and officials had told people not to panic and said the risk to health was still low. These instances can be identified as “a mediating mixed-message discourse” that contains “both elements of fear and reassurance” (Ungar, 2008: 492). Moreover, video reports, such as “Pandemic no cause for alarm”<sup>126</sup> and “Flu pandemic is not apocalyptic”,<sup>127</sup> were keen to emphasize that a pandemic was “defined by geography, not by severity” and most cases were

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<sup>124</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8096063.stm> (accessed 17 June 2009).

<sup>125</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8099986.stm> (accessed 17 June 2009).

<sup>126</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8096253.stm> (accessed 13 June 2009).

<sup>127</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8094569.stm> (accessed 13 June 2009).

mild. Furthermore, the Guardian’s video in fact called the public to calm down in the face of the pandemic. Prominent in this regard was the video content highlighted in its H1N1 news section, a series of livedraw animations by Patrick Blower. For example, the animation under the title of “Fly me to the moon”<sup>128</sup> ironically questioned how far would people go to avoid swine flu when it began to spread fast. Another animation, “What swine flu panic?”<sup>129</sup> reminds the audience that while news headlines warned of a global threat, people everywhere were just getting on with their normal lives (see below).

Guardian’s livedraw animation:



The series of animations on swine flu created a humorous and relaxed atmosphere for the audience and played an obvious role in undercutting the potential risk, perhaps evidence of a tendency in British public culture to make light of adversity. In New

<sup>128</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/video/2009/jul/03/swine-flu-space-moon> (accessed 14 July 2009).

<sup>129</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/video/2009/may/01/swine-flu> (accessed 17 June 2009).

Zealand, the cartoon entitled “There’s nothing to worry about”<sup>130</sup> at NZHerald showed a similar ethos.

Cartoon “There’s nothing to worry about” at NZHerald:



The humorous and colourful cartoon commentary indeed suggests more of a discourse of reassurance and of a desire to downplay the risk. It strengthened the balance and variety of the in-depth sections, playing a role like salad on side of the heavy main dish. Chinese websites seemed to focus very much on the main alone and none of those studied here drew on such a relaxed style in swine flu reports. Further analysis, such as about the social implications of the two discourses, will be given in the section on textual news analysis.

### 6.2.3 Multimedia news packages

This stage of analysis found limited multimedia news packages on swine flu. As elaborated above, when compared with the Olympic case, there was significantly less audio and video content on swine flu at both the Chinese and the Western websites. The three newspaper websites in the West were overwhelmingly filled with textual news. The website of the BBC still lead the way in well-integrated multimedia news packages with the help of its embedded model. As in the Olympic case study, the

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<sup>130</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10570016](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10570016) (accessed 12 June 2009).

majority of the BBC's news pieces on swine flu were complemented with multimedia elements. The embedded flash audio and video (in comparison with content for stand-alone media players) was still a distinctive characteristic of the BBC's multimedia packages. No other websites under analysis employed the embedded flash model. In China, most video content, when clicked, opened a stand-alone media player that incorporated neither texts nor picture coverage. The most common kind of multimedia news package was the combination of texts and pictures. Multimedia news packages seem to be generally underdeveloped in the case of H1N1 influenza, largely owing to the disease nature of this case. As elaborated in the literature, multimedia is used when images tell part of the story (Zelizer, 2005), whereas the influenza is told mostly in figures as well as in official and medical statements. Therefore, it is not surprising that multimedia news packages were less popular in the flu case than in the highly visual Olympics.

The analysis strongly suggests that the Olympic case is a prominent instance of high audio and video usage, but it is not an exceptional case that tells of a completely different landscape to the rest of global web journalism. Instead, the Olympic case combines with the influenza case to illustrate significant differences between Western and Chinese media organizations as well as between Western and Chinese online media logics. The two case studies imply a relatively weak commonality among Western media organizations. During the sample period, the three newspaper websites employed absolutely no video coverage from broadcasting companies. In the Olympic case, the absence of a large amount of video coverage within newspaper websites can be explained in terms of the lack of broadcasting rights of the Olympics, since the exclusive national broadcasting rights had been granted to broadcasting media and their affiliated news websites. However, in the influenza case, the contrast between broadcasting-affiliated websites and press-affiliated websites in terms of video quantity is still sharp. A practical reason here is that it is too expensive to buy the broadcast material and it would still be second class to television sites. Multimedia content is expensive to produce, and would only make sense for big events or when

there is a large potential audience. Shovelware multimedia had been cautiously avoided by Western websites and the emphasis of the media logic lies largely in originality. As Deuze (1999, 2003) claims, online journalism, no matter in what kind of format, should be produced almost exclusively for presentation and distribution via the web. The series of livedraw animations on the influenza, which was the only video available at the in-depth section of the Guardian, as well as the sporadic audio clips at the NYT, were evidence for a logic of originality.

In contrast, the two cases confirm a tight cooperation between Chinese news websites and traditional media. More precisely, a huge amount of online video coverage in China is dependent on traditional television streams. Shovelware was widely employed at Chinese news websites. Little web-generated video content existed on the flu case. The Western media logic that highlights newness and originality is much less important in the competitive Chinese online environment, where timeliness and comprehensiveness are favoured much more. Mainstream news websites in China seem to be cautious in investing in original video content. The Beijing Olympics was a particular case where Chinese mainstream news websites generally agreed upon the value of investing in and more importantly, were allowed by the media authorities to create and broadcast original video. For the pandemic, it was more practical and economical to employ video from television broadcasters.

### **6.3 Interactivity**

As in the Olympic case study, this phase of analysis employs the model of inactive, active and highly active interactivity to examine the implementation of interactive features of in-depth sections on swine flu. Various interactive devices, as listed in Chapter 5, are closely examined in the flu case. Moreover, this case study pays particular attention to the comparison between the two cases. Devices that are absent in one or other of the cases deserve attention since they might closely related to the development or the retreat of journalism online. The actual function of the interactive

mechanism is still the essence of this stage of analysis.

### 6.3.1 Inactive interactivity

The study of inactive interactivity here by and large supports the previous findings. Chinese in-depth news sections online offered fewer inactive interactivity options than their Western counterparts. The pandemic case confirms the fact that devices of archives, search engines, options to adjust the text and mobile versions were widely employed at Chinese websites. In the West, mainstream websites favoured RSS, archive, search engines, printable versions, social sharing websites, and mobile versions. The feature of adjusting the text was not very popular among Western websites. A few new devices were found at websites of the BBC, NBC and the *NZHerald*, while Chinese websites remained almost unchanged in the provision of inactive interactivity devices, in comparison to the Olympic case. Such a difference between China and the West again indicates that Chinese websites are less active in facilitating inactive interactivity.

#### *Complexity of choice*

Two aspects were taken into examination: the choice of news content and the choice of navigational devices. In terms of the content choice, Chinese in-depth sections on swine flu offered far more choices than their Western counterparts. The front page of Chinese in-depth sections was much longer than that of Western sections. As many as 15 full-screen snapshots<sup>131</sup> were taken to save the complete front page of most Chinese in-depth sections, such as at Sina, Sohu and NetEase. In contrast, no more than 5 full-screen snapshots were needed to save the complete front page of most Western in-depth sections, such as sections of at the BBC, NBC, the Guardian and the *NZHerald*. The front page of Chinese in-depth sections provided various pieces of news in various forms (e.g. breaking news, news in categories such as China's response, the global reaction, impact on the economy; in the form of texts, pictures, audio, video and multimedia), texts of various kinds with background information (e.g.

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<sup>131</sup> The full-screen snapshots were taken on a 1280\*800 pixel wide screen.

Q&A, tables of updated statistical report, diagrams of disease-comparison, interactive maps of the spread of the virus, cartoons illustrating symptoms and protection tips), as well as various analyses and commentaries (columns, blogs, interviews). Western websites usually listed fewer content choices on the front page of the section. For example, the front page of the BBC's in-depth section on swine flu placed one main news story with a lead and a picture, with 12 headlines of key stories below, and a few background stories. Similarly, the front page of the NZHerald's in-depth section had one piece of main news with a relatively large picture and then four other pieces of stories below it, showing their leads and small pictures, followed by a list of news headlines. The different journalistic logics, as shown in the Olympic case, are also evident here. Chinese websites emphasize comprehensiveness, whereas their Western counterparts are highly selective over news content.

With regard to navigational options, findings here generally echo the results of the Olympic case study: Western websites offered more choices than Chinese websites. The Anglo-American news websites by and large provided a good many options, for example, emailing items to friends, printable versions, social bookmarking, RSS, mobile versions and search options. Moreover, these devices were placed in prominent places and some were placed both on top and at the bottom of news stories. Websites, such as the Guardian, NBC and the NZHerald, had brightly coloured icons for navigational devices, as elaborated in the Olympic case study. Furthermore, some websites invented new devices that were not seen in the Olympic case. The website of the BBC, as an example, employed a device called "Most Popular Now", as shown below.

Live traffic indicator—"Most Popular Now" at the BBC:



This device monitored the live traffic to the site, revealing “which stories people are reading and e-mailing to their friends, which video clips they are watching, and how this changes minute-by-minute through the day”.<sup>132</sup> Viewers could also click on the map for a regional view of the most popular.

In comparison with the Western websites, Chinese websites had fewer navigational tools and most devices were placed at the bottom of news stories where they would not easily be noticed. Only three navigational options, namely, text-adjustment, search engines, and mobile versions, were widely utilized by Chinese websites. Interestingly, the option of adjusting the size of text was consistently highlighted at Chinese websites in both case studies. Few Western websites offered such a device. With the further development and ever-increasing popularity of mobile telecommunications, the option of mobile versions was emphasized by all of the websites under analysis. Another popular device was the search engine, but the specific implementation was quite different between Chinese and Western websites. Searching within sections was only available at two Western websites, namely the Guardian and the NYT, while it was available at all the Chinese in-depth sections. In addition, most websites under analysis offered daily archives for the 2008 Olympic coverage, but only two websites

<sup>132</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/help/5065806.stm> (accessed 20 June 2009).



(neither of them Western) provided such archives for swine flu news. The websites of Sina and Sohu offered archives that allowed users to trace back to the front page of previous days' swine flu section. Sina even provided different time options for the archive. For example, if one clicked on 12 June 2009 of the archive calendar, one could choose to view snapshots at two or three different times on that day, such as 07:00am, 14:00pm or 23:00pm. In terms of navigational tools, there was no substantial change in Chinese online environment when compared with the Olympic case. It again supports previous findings that Chinese mainstream websites are less active in this aspect of interactivity.

#### *Effort users must exert*

In line with the discovery from the Olympic case, Chinese websites required less effort than Western websites in consuming news. The busy web pages encouraged viewers to click and browse, rather than search and read the news content. As discussed earlier, a huge amount of information, ranging from breaking news, statistical reports, rich informative introductions on protective measures and comparisons with other epidemics, were available at the front pages of Chinese in-depth sections. The site was so busy that almost everything available was displayed or just a click away. Moreover, the search engine at Chinese websites was usually complemented with a few commonly searched words, for example, symptoms, protective tips and so on. This effort-saving practice was evident also in the Olympic case and becomes a distinctive feature of Chinese online news.

#### *Monitoring information use*

A wide variety of interactive devices that monitor information use were consistently utilized and clearly presented at Western websites, while they were not consistently employed and neatly presented at Chinese websites. Options examined in the Olympic case study, namely, customization, news feeds, social bookmarking links, most popular rankings, and registration to receive email updates or mobile news alerts were placed at prominent places at almost every news web page of the Western in-depth

sections on swine flu, just as was found in the Olympic case. In addition, this case study revealed a few new interactive devices for monitoring information use. For example, the website of the BBC provided a smart device called “Most Popular Now”, as mentioned above, presenting the most read and most emailed stories minute by minute or the day so far. Compared with the previous “most popular rankings”, such a live device monitors information use in a more direct and vivid means. It assumes users using it want to know as soon as others who are “in the know” have found out about a hot topic. Then in addition to the previous options of recommending a story to others, websites such as the NZHerald and NBC added icons for users to send instant messages to recommend articles, pictures, video clips and news stories. It should be noted that these differences are less likely to be topic-related, that is, related to a difference between the swine flu and Olympic coverage, but rather demonstrate the development of the inactive interactivity mechanism over time.

In contrast, there were no major changes at the Chinese websites in devices for monitoring information use. As in the Olympic case study, the social bookmarking links were still not popular among Chinese websites under study, and few Chinese websites placed options such as news feeds, customization, and receiving updates at users’ fingertips. More precisely, users would be able to find these services if they were keen on them, while a number of users might barely notice the provision of the services, as icons for monitoring information were usually submerged in the busy site. Again, Chinese websites generally showed little consistency in the utilization and presentation of rankings such as “most popular”. The methodologies of the rankings were not consistent within the in-depth section. Within the same website, some web pages were accompanied by a box of “most read news”, “most clicked stories” and some by “top 10 pictures”. The ranking was shown in some web pages within the in-depth section, while absent in others. Moreover, the most popular ranking at Chinese websites was not neatly presented, and was ambiguous. The top news rankings together with various advertising titles were collectively indicated as “hot information”. It is unclear what parameters the ranking was based on. Such an

ambiguous practice sharply contrasts to the Western tactic that makes the ranking a technological feature, the BBC's live traffic monitor, for example.

#### *Responsiveness to the user (computer response)*

Generally speaking, all of the websites under study produced an informative computer-generated response to user queries, such as instructions, error messages, and so on. Compared with Chinese websites, Western websites were better at offering detailed help pages and FAQs in both case studies. Findings in this aspect are almost the same as findings from the Olympic case and thus deserve little further analysis here.

#### **6.3.2 Active interactivity and highly active interactivity**

The analysis of active interactivity of news websites includes studies of human responsiveness, ease of adding information, playfulness and facilitation of interpersonal communication. The qualitative analysis finds that Chinese websites, when compared with their Western counterparts, were generally more active in facilitating the four perspectives of interactivity. However, compared with the practice in the Olympic case, the pandemic case study witnessed an obvious decline in the use of interactive mechanisms. Chinese websites offered much fewer interactive devices, especially the playful elements and the interest-arousal gadgets. There were practically no examples of the highly active interactivity that facilitates offline human interactions. Such a discrepancy can be largely explained in terms of the different natures of the two news events. The festive Olympics, as mentioned earlier, seemed to be a good opportunity to show the most dramatic journalistic practice online, whereas the serious epidemic influenza was obviously not a suitable case to incorporate many playful gadgets and to organize offline activities, since people were cautiously avoiding crowds and human interaction. Nevertheless, the contrast between Chinese and Western websites in the use of active interactivity devices is still evident here.

#### *Responsiveness to the user (human response)*

The study on interactive devices that enable journalists' responsiveness to the user finds that Chinese websites differ from Western websites in terms of specific means for communication. Online forums that publish user feedback were widely utilized by Chinese websites, such as CCTV and NetEase. Web editors were occasionally involved to answer viewers' enquiries but the central function of such forums was to make use of the free talent of users to assist responsiveness. In the West, journalists' blogs were promoted by news websites as useful means to improve the interactive communication between journalists and users. In the swine flu case, websites such as the BBC and the NYT highlighted their medical reporters' blogs. The journalist bloggers would promptly reply to the top questions or comments and some would post an updated blog to answer common queries or enquiries. It is interesting to note that forums and blogs have become popular platforms for online journalists' responsiveness to users; other options debated in the literature, such as specific feedback mechanisms and email addresses of journalists, have become marginalized with respect to this aspect of interactivity. Contact information of the individual member of the news team was not available on any of the websites. Instead, links to report an error or contact the webmaster, editors in general (e.g. health editors), as well as media organizations could be found at the bottom of each site. Nevertheless, news websites reminded users that individual response was not guaranteed. In addition, the widely employed live communication between journalists and users during the 2008 Olympics was not available in the swine flu case. Through live Olympic reports (either in texts or stream), users were able to post questions and seek answers from online hosts in the chat rooms. Such a live response was very popular among Chinese websites during the 2008 Olympics, yet was absent in this case study. Commercial concerns likely explain this difference. The online media in China generally saw the Olympics as a valuable opportunity to showcase their websites and thus to draw substantial online traffic. Compared with the Olympic case, the influenza case was less likely to draw a huge number of viewers online, and hence news websites showed little interest in investing in the resource-heavy live communication between journalists and users.

### *Ease of adding information*

Tim O'Reilly, who is widely credited with coining the term Web 2.0, highlights the importance of “harnessing collective intelligence”, claiming that “network effects from user contributions are the key to market dominance in the Web 2.0 era” (O'Reilly, 2005). With ease of adding information, what *New Yorker* columnist James Surowiecki (2004) calls “the wisdom of crowds” comes into play. The study here indicates that Chinese websites differed markedly from Western sites in facilitating user content. Chinese sites actively provided various platforms, such as blogs, twitters, podcasts, and discussion forums, for users to have more involvement with the sites. In the West, news websites were less interested in providing those platforms at their own sites; instead, the sites employed more social network and bookmarking links to guide viewers to other providers, so that the news organizations become prominent on the social web. Through these dramatically different tactics, Chinese and Western news websites utilized the Web 2.0 features in quite different ways.

### **Blogs**

Echoing the discovery from the Olympic case, quite a few blog headlines were placed on the front page of in-depth sections at Chinese websites, whereas their Western counterparts presented very limited blogs. Within the swine flu section, there was a blog section at every Chinese website. A wide variety of blogs concerning the outbreak of swine flu, such as celebrity blogs, netizens' blogs and journalists' blogs as well as blogs in texts, pictures, cartoons and video were available at the blog section. In contrast, only one or two blog titles were available on the front page of the swine flu sections at the BBC, the Guardian and the NYT. In the in-depth sections of NBC and the NZHerald did not have any blogs on their front pages. None of the Western websites under study had a specific blog subsection under the swine flu section.

Moreover, Chinese websites were very active in employing netizens' blogs, whereas Western websites tended to be relatively conservative in utilizing these. All of the

Chinese websites under study are Blog Service Providers (BSP) for ordinary internet users, while none of the Western websites studied here provided blog platforms for users, except the website of the BBC. Among the Chinese in-depth sections under study, the grassroots blog has become a useful way to complement news stories. Blogs that were highlighted by news websites included diaries sharing the experience of being quarantined, proposals for delaying or cancelling travel plans, posts recording the hospital life (written by doctors, nurses or patients) as well as descriptions of the overseas pandemic situation (contributed by members of the Chinese diaspora). The netizens' blog plays an important role in filling the gaps of news reports. In sharp contrast, the Western websites under study tend to be comparatively conservative in utilizing blog posts, especially netizens' blogs. The website of the BBC offered blog platforms for internet users with certain projects, but not for the swine flu case. Western websites seem to be particularly cautious in involving users' participation in the site, since it can be both time and resource consuming to monitor users' contributions to avoid inappropriate content (e.g. pornography). More related discussion is presented in the following analysis on discussion forums online. Additionally, in line with the finding from the Olympic case, the front page of the Western in-depth section only highlights journalist blogs. For example, "Fergus on flu" is the only blog shown at the front page of the swine flu section at the BBC. It was written by a BBC medical correspondent, Fergus Walsh, discussing how swine flu might affect the public and what was being done about it. Similarly, the Guardian offered news blogs reporting key events of swine flu day by day to track the spread around the world as well as further discussions on swine flu vaccine and social implications of the pandemic. In the US, the NYT news blog "The Lede" posted limited entries concerning the swine flu outbreak—eight pieces in three months (May-July). A few blog titles from other websites were presented in NYT's swine flu navigator to complement the news, which is a distinctive characteristic of the site. No other websites under analysis, either Chinese or English, offered blogs that were written elsewhere.

With regard to the concept of the blogosphere, Chinese websites again crafted restricted blogospheres in this case study. In China, there was little connection between blogs sourced from different BSPs, largely due to commercial demands. Devices facilitating the linking of people and information networks, such as “blogrolls”, trackbacks and links in comments, were insufficiently explored in blogs concerning swine flu. The study here finds that very few blogs within the in-depth section employed trackbacks and links in comments. Only a small number of blogs had blogrolls that listed the blogger’s friends of other bloggers who frequently read the blog site. Due to the large audience base and ever-changing blogrolls, the construction of a network of people was not solid enough to necessarily enhance the blogosphere. Moreover, the news feed, as a useful device for the further expansion of blogs and the successful dissemination of information within the blogosphere, was still underdeveloped among Chinese blogs. Only two websites under analysis (CCTV and NetEase) had prominent and functional RSS services for swine flu blogs and there were no obvious symbols of news feeds on the blog pages of QQ, Sina and Xinhuanet. Most of the findings here regarding the aspect of blogosphere are in line with the findings from the Olympic case and indicate a restricted blogosphere within Chinese blog sites.

Western websites that possessed swine flu blogs revealed a relatively more solid structure to their parts of the blogosphere. There were well-connected network of both information and people, which observers claim to be the main components of the blogosphere (Newman, 2003). News feeds were highlighted at all the blog pages so as to facilitate network development. For example, the BBC provided both RSS and ATOM of its “Fergus on flu feed” for viewers to stay up to date with the medical correspondent’s blog. A considerable number of hypertexts and hyperlinks for the trackback were available at blogs concerning swine flu. This phenomenon might be largely explained in terms of the dominance of journalists’ blogs among Western websites. The journalistic professionals tend to be more likely to employ trackbacks than most ordinary netizens. The relatively low profile of journalists’ blogs in China

has more or less contributed to the restricted blogosphere among Chinese blogs concerning swine flu, despite the large number of blogs and the diverse variety of blogs.

### **Twitter**

As a useful tool to convey informal and accessible moments, Twitter was underexplored by the Chinese websites examined in the Olympic case. However, 2009 was a year of dramatic developments in the popularity of the Twitter service in the Chinese online environment, mainly at Chinese portal sites. First of all, the previously disputed translation of Twitter (as discussed in the Olympic case), became generally agreed upon as Weibo (means micro-blogging) and was recognized by more and more internet users in China. The “Sina Weibo” was ranked as one of the hottest cultural products online in 2009, according to the search ranking published at Baidu (the most popular search engine in China).<sup>133</sup> Moreover, greatly owing to the growing involvement of celebrities, the Twitter service offered by Sina and QQ gained much popularity.<sup>134</sup> With regard to this case study, there were tens of thousands of tweets in China concerning swine flu. However, since the most active Twitter users are netizens and celebrities, the real instrumental interaction between Twitter and journalists was still unclear in Chinese cyberspace. More precisely, Twitter’s role as a valuable tool for news hunting and tracking is somewhat vague in China, as celebrity tweets focusing on the trivial led the way in the Chinese Twitter market.

This case study finds a retreat in the use of Twitter among Western websites under study. In the Olympic case, a few mainstream websites (the NYT, the BBC and the Guardian) offered connections to Twitter to some extent. However, the examination here finds that the Twitter service was invisible on all of the in-depth news sections under study. In fact, the Western mainstream media online seem to be very concerned about Twitter’s role in information spread. The news blog on swine flu at the NYT

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<sup>133</sup> Available at: [www.baidu.com/2009](http://www.baidu.com/2009) (accessed 30 December 2009).

<sup>134</sup> Available at: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_63f3c38a0100h49g.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_63f3c38a0100h49g.html) (accessed 6 January 2010).



highlighted a post headlined “Swine flu: Twitter’s power to misinform”.<sup>135</sup> In this blog, Evgeny Morozov<sup>136</sup> found that “despite all the recent Twitter-enthusiasm about this platform’s unique power to alert millions of people in decentralized and previously unavailable ways, there are quite a few reasons to be concerned about Twitter’s role in facilitating an unnecessary global panic about swine flu.” Morozov pointed out that “... having millions of people wrap up all their fears into 140 characters and blurt them out in the public might have some dangerous consequences, networked panic being one of them.” Probably because of such concerns, Western mainstream websites tended to be very cautious in connecting with Twitter in their in-depth sections.

### **Podcasts/vlogs**

The close examination here finds that none of the in-depth sections under study offered specific podcasts on swine flu. In China, the term “podcast” was invisible from all of the Chinese sections on swine flu, which contrasts sharply to the previous finding that Olympic podcasts were available at every in-depth section. The discrepancy here can be largely explained in terms of the distinctive characteristic of podcasts in Chinese cyberspace. As elaborated earlier, rather than being characterized by subscription or automatic downloading, podcasts function in China mostly in terms of participation—anyone can make them. In other words, the podcast is regarded as a video blog (vlog) to a great extent and netizens’ video contributions largely determined the popularity of podcasts in the Chinese online environment. Thus, the different natures of the two events—festive Olympics and pandemic disease—might significantly influence netizens’ enthusiasm in creating specific podcasts. In the West, there were no web generated podcasts concerning swine flu; sporadic podcasts on swine flu overwhelmingly relied on traditional media, such as radio programmes that talked about swine flu. For example, “5 Live Breakfast”, the morning programme of the BBC’s Radio 5, welcomed phone-ins to discuss how swine flu was affecting the

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<sup>135</sup> Available at: <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/27/updates-on-the-swine-flu> (accessed 20 July 2009).

<sup>136</sup> Evgeny Morozov is a reporter at *Foreign Policy*, after examining tweets on swine flu.

public.<sup>137</sup> Internet users were able to download or subscribe to the programme and thus to gain access to the podcast. This finding is in line with previous findings and has confirmed the emphasis on functions of subscriptions and gadgetry.

### **Discussion forums/comments on news reports**

This stage of study finds that there were more links and devices for users' comments in Chinese than Western in-depth sections. A discussion forum on swine flu was available at every Chinese in-depth section under study. A few websites, such as Sina, QQ and NetEase, displayed comment boxes at prominent places within the front page of the in-depth section. Such a convenient device greatly encouraged users' comments. For example, as of 16 July 2009 (the last day of the research period), there were more than 2 million comments at QQ's discussion forum on swine flu and hundreds of thousands of comments at Sina and NetEase. A wide variety of topics and debates about pandemic were available at the discussion forum. From May to early June, widely discussed topics included blame on flu-infected students returning to China from overseas, apologies to the public posted by the flu-infected students' parents, proposals for delaying or cancelling plans of travelling from overseas as well as advocacy of strict quarantine. Since the end of June, popular discussion topics gradually changed to forgiving and understanding the infectious students (e.g. "our enemy is the virus, not the virus carriers"<sup>138</sup>), reminding others the lessons learned from SARS (e.g. "transparent information is the best way to conquer the crisis"<sup>139</sup>), sharing pleasant quarantine experiences (e.g. free books, various foods, good service and convenient internet access), proposing protection tips (e.g. "what kind of protective measures did you take?"<sup>140</sup>) and debates on whether the nation had overreacted on the epidemic. The change in focus of discussion forums perhaps suggests that through continuous debates and discussion online, netizens gradually

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<sup>137</sup> Available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/fivelivebreakfast/2009/07/how\\_is\\_swine\\_flu\\_affecting\\_you.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/fivelivebreakfast/2009/07/how_is_swine_flu_affecting_you.html) (accessed 15 July 2009).

<sup>138</sup> Available at: <http://news.qq.com/zt/2009/eyes/lcc.htm> (accessed 2 July 2009).

<sup>139</sup> Available at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/z/zhuliugan/comment.html> (accessed 29 June 2009).

<sup>140</sup> Available at: <http://bbs.cctv.com/viewthread.php?tid=14274500> (accessed 22 July 2009).

became more rational towards the influenza pandemic. The internet played an increasingly important role as an empowering instrument for enabling and facilitating public communication and discourse among Chinese netizens. This issue is discussed more in the section on textual news analysis.

Within the Western websites under study, only two in-depth sections (the BBC and NBC) offered links to discussion forums on their front pages. The website of the BBC invited viewers to share their accounts from affected areas and displayed comments together with news reports on an interactive map (see below). However, my close examination finds that the site drew very few comments from users—only four eye witness stories from readers by 16 July 2009, as indicated via the yellow icon on the map.

Eyewitness map at the BBC<sup>141</sup>:

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<sup>141</sup> Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking\\_point/8020806.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/8020806.stm) (accessed 16 July 2009).

## Eyewitness map: Swine flu

Governments around the world are hurrying to contain the spread of a new swine flu virus after outbreaks were reported in Mexico, the US and Canada.

At least 100 people are now suspected to have died of the disease in Mexico.

Use this map to explore the swine flu outbreak in video, audio, pictures and text.

### HOW TO USE THIS MAP

- Video icons show clips
- Camera reveal photos
- Text icons denote reports



In the online community, users of NBC discussed how concerned they were about swine flu and whether they would make changes to prevent infection. Several votes and polls (e.g. would you wear a face mask?; have you changed your travel plans?; and would you stay home if swine flu spread to your city?) were designed by the site to encourage users' participation. As discussed in the Olympic case, online polls and surveys often give an illusion of participation, since those respondents who voluntarily participate in the poll or survey tend to have strong opinions on the topic and are more likely to be interested in and concerned about the topic than those who do not (Wu and Weaver 1997).

In terms of the provision of links for users to comment on news stories, the Chinese websites under analysis were generally much more active than their Western counterparts. All of the Chinese websites studied here offered direct links for viewers to make comments on news stories. CCTV only provided a general discussion forum for news comments, but the other Chinese websites provided specific discussion forums on specific news via hypertexts of "I want to comment". It should be noted

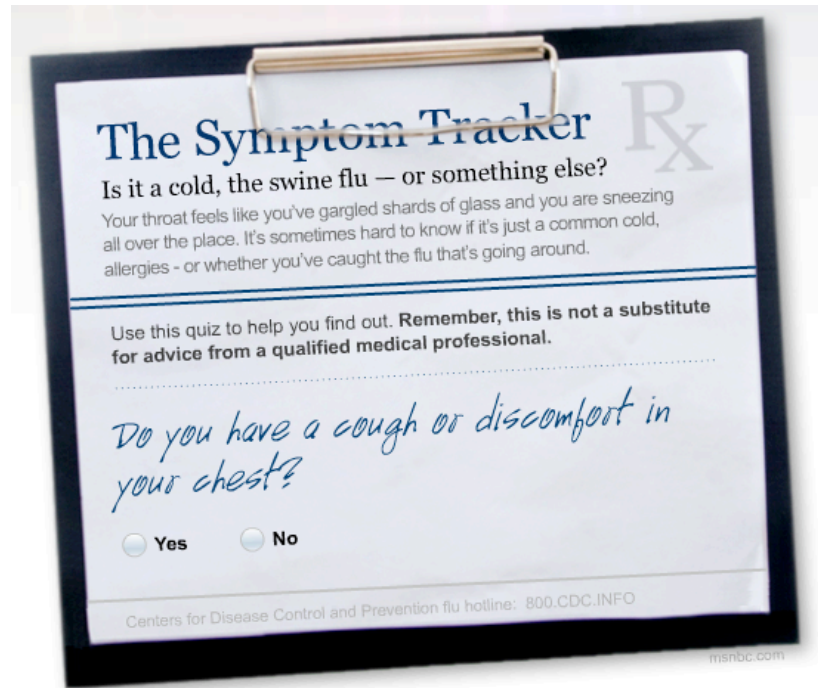
that the hypertext links to online forums were placed in prominent places, either right below news headlines (QQ, Sohu, NetEase and Xinhuanet), or at the bottom of the news stories (Sina). In addition, most sites offered number indications in brackets besides the commenting hypertext, so that viewers could clearly see how many comments had been posted on the news story. In the West, other than the Guardian and NBC, none of the websites provided hyperlinks or hypertexts for users' comments on specific news stories. However, hypertexts to comment on the news were shown beside some headlines at the Guardian, and absent on quite a few news stories. No consistent pattern could be discerned in the provision of comments links at the Guardian. The NBC site did not provide commenting platforms at its own site. Instead, the site encouraged viewers to discuss the story on the Newsvine website, which is a social news platform that draws content from users and syndicated content from the mainstream news media. The practice of creating routes to other sites, especially in the aspect of netizens' contribution, is rarely seen within Chinese mainstream websites, given the intensely competitive atmosphere of the Chinese online market. The different strategies of facilitating users' contributions are also evident here. As discussed in the analysis of blog platforms, Western news websites preferred to push netizens to social websites to comment, blog, tweet, and so on, whereas Chinese news websites offered almost all the Web 2.0 features and preferred to pull netizens in to have more involvement inside the site. The different logics between news organizations and portal sites are connected to these differences. Based on the discussion above, it can be roughly concluded that Chinese websites under study, when compared with their Western counterparts, devoted more effort to the convenience and facilitation of user comments and discussion.

### *Playfulness*

Due to the particularly serious nature of this case, the utilization of games, activities and other curiosity-arousal tactics was not common in swine flu sections. Only a few websites under analysis offered certain kinds of playful devices. The website of NBC provided an interactive quiz to help users distinguish swine flu from seasonal flu and

something else. The symptom tracker,<sup>142</sup> as shown below, tends to be much more interesting and interactive than a simple list of symptom facts.

The symptom tracker at NBC:



In China, the website of QQ, which is famous for board games online, offered a mini-game under the headline of “conquering swine flu”. To play the game, users needed to move the mouse to dodge through the virus attack.

Mini-game of conquering swine flu at QQ<sup>143</sup>:

<sup>142</sup> Available at: [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33435531/ns/health-cold\\_and\\_flu](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33435531/ns/health-cold_and_flu) (accessed 12 July 2009).

<sup>143</sup> Available at: <http://kid.qq.com/a/20090522/000021.htm> (accessed 3 July 2009).



The aim of this game, according to QQ, was to help kids know about swine flu and protect themselves from the virus attack.

Besides these two examples, I assume interactive maps also possess certain playful elements. As shown from the above “eyewitness map” at the BBC, the informational value was rather low in that map, while the potential of participation was comparatively high. Users could view the map in 2D mode, switch to road view or aerial view, display or hide labels, as well as zoom in or out to track the impact of the swine flu outbreak. Similarly, quite a few Chinese websites employed interactive maps that were high in terms of playfulness and low in terms of information. For example, Sina utilized interactive maps to show confirmed cases and deaths worldwide. Through the use of interactive maps, Sohu presented the number of confirmed cases and suspected cases in China, as shown below.

The interactive map at Sohu<sup>144</sup>:



This kind of information could, to an extent, be clearly illustrated via tables or pure texts. The interactive map here functions less as an information indicator and more as a participation promoter, which partly supports Ha and James' (1998) interpretation of play theory that "mass media content is play for the audience, not just information". Participatory play and active audience involvement, as part of Stephenson's (1967) play theory, are key to understanding the main function of the interactive maps here.

#### *Facilitation of interpersonal communication*

The internet's role of facilitating interpersonal communication was expected to be prominent in this case study, since people were more likely to avoid personal contacts and employ this medium to communicate during the pandemic period. Chinese websites studied here paid more attention to devices that facilitated interpersonal communication. Mainstream websites in China actively arranged live chat rooms, in which health authorities and medical professionals could answer netizens' questions as well as queries live. Moreover, hospitalized patients and people in the quarantined area used instant messenger services to keep in touch with other people. The high penetration of IM (especially Tencent's QQ) among Chinese internet users was a

<sup>144</sup> Available at: <http://news.sohu.com/s2009/zhuliuganyiqing/> (accessed 12 June 2009).



major shaping influence on interpersonal communication online. However, there were no examples among Western websites examined here of the facilitation of online person-to-person communication.

Cultural differences as well as complexities of the media system in China are both relevant. The Chinese, like most other Asian cultures, “value their consensual and communal traditions with their emphasis on duties and obligations to the collective and social harmony” (Mehra, 1989: 3). Media in China “stand in harmony with Confucian philosophy, which stresses consensus and cooperation” (Heuvel and Dennis, 1993: iii). The platform for facilitating personal communication would play an active role in terms of consensus and cooperation. Moreover, mass media in China are closely associated with the government. In fact, as a state-owned property, Chinese news organizations are “preeminently political propaganda machines”, only secondly “competitors in the media marketplace” and lastly “the provider of a public service” (Hu, 2007: 337), as mentioned earlier. Chinese media online in this case spoke in harmony with the government to sound the alarm about the pandemic and to promote protection measures. In contrast, the Western media are dedicated “to individual freedom and rights” (Heuvel and Dennis, 1993: iii). Mainstream media in the West are not so interested in devices facilitating personal communication, which might be criticized as not leaving people enough individual space. Moreover, “the press-government harmony model” is not favoured in the West, as it would cause “a media credibility gap” and people “tend to distrust the mass media being too closely associated with the government” (Gunaratne, 1999: 206). Therefore, Western media seem to be more reluctant to set up chat rooms that facilitate the synchronous communication between netizens and authorities, when governments were actively managing swine flu.

The study here finds no examples of highly active interactivity that focuses on offline human interactions enabled by the web-based media. This can be explained largely in terms of the subject matter. As mentioned earlier, people tried to reduce human

interactions to a large extent and thus avoided crowds and populous activities. It is understandable that mainstream news websites were not interested in organizing offline activities during the influenza pandemic.

### 6.3.3 Summary and implications

To sum up, the study of the interactive features of news in-depth sections on H1N1 influenza supports most of the previous findings from the Olympic case. The two case studies confirm the fact that Chinese websites offered fewer inactive interactive devices that facilitate news navigation and information monitoring. Western websites paid particular attention to this aspect. A few interesting and useful new devices were found at Western websites under study, such as the live traffic monitor at the BBC. In addition, all of the websites studied here profiled their mobile services, in the face of the increasing popularity of mobile telecommunications worldwide. Compared with Western websites, Chinese websites were keener on providing active interactive features to enhance users' contributions and participation, as part of their portal tactic to pull in and keep users. The grassroots blog has become an important complement alongside news stories at Chinese websites, but are far from being influential and still has a long way from being part of the mainstream. It is interesting to find that the swine flu case has witnessed dramatic development and popularity of Twitter in Chinese online environment and a general retreat in the use of Twitter among Western websites under study. However, Twitter's role as a valuable tool for news hunting and tracking is not clear yet in China, as celebrity and netizens' tweets focusing on the trivial have lead the way in the Chinese Twitter market. Both general discussion forums and the specific discussion forum for individual news stories were available at users' fingertips at Chinese websites, which again shows Chinese web media's efforts in facilitating users' contributions. Probably because of the serious health issue in this case, playful attributes, devices enabling personal communication, as well as highly interactive features that facilitate offline activities are not as evident as in the Olympic case. The absence of a few interactive features together with the generally similar findings has made this section comparatively shorter than the Olympic equivalents.

## 6.4 Hypertextuality

Echoing the research design of the first case study, both the hyperlinks placed on the front pages of the in-depth sections and the hypertexts embedded in the textual news stories have been examined in this second case study. Findings here are generally in line with findings from the Olympic case study that hyperlinks were largely employed as context-provision and attraction-promotion, while the potential of hypertexts is only weakly exploited among Chinese websites. The NYT is a prominent example concerning the use of hypertextuality in web journalism. The three key attributes of hypertextuality (context-provision, non-linear approach, and different uses of internal and external hyperlinks), as discussed in the literature review, were well presented at the NYT.

### 6.4.1 Analysis of the front page of in-depth sections

Though not as busy as their Olympic sections, Chinese in-depth news sections on swine flu still possessed far more hyperlinks than their Anglo-American counterparts. The number of hyperlinks on the front page of Chinese in-depth sections was between 100 and 250, whereas the number of hyperlinks on Western ones was between 25 and 90. In China, Xinhuanet had around 100 hyperlinks, which was the least among the six Chinese websites and NetEase had the most, with around 240 hyperlinks. Compared with the Olympic sections where most Chinese in-depth sections had more than 500 hyperlinks and Sina had more than 1,000, the news section for the pandemic seems to be condensed. However, compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese in-depth sections are still sizeable. The flu section of the BBC had only about 25 hyperlinks and the in-depth section of the NYT had around 85 hyperlinks, which was the most among the Western sites under analysis. Hence, the contrast between Chinese and Western websites in the total number of hyperlinks is still sharp. Findings here together with the contrasting numbers found in the first case study confirm the different logics between Chinese online professionals and their Western colleagues.

The assertion that the hypertextuality would refocus journalistic practice from selection and more towards analytical structuring of the widest possible range of information (Fredin, 1997) is evident in Chinese cyberspace. On the contrary, the Anglo-American news websites that offered limited hyperlinks suggest a practice emphasizing still expertise, which pays particular attention to selecting, trimming and highlighting. The hypertextuality serves as part of that order of journalistic practice, rather than a revolutionary trigger for main journalistic changes.

In this case study, a contextualized journalism tactic becomes clear, though Chinese and Western websites employ this tactic to different extents. Acknowledging that the audience might not be familiar with swine flu, online journalism professionals attached great importance to contextual material. Except for the NZHerald, all the other websites examined here offered pandemic facts, background introductions, treatment and prevention information, current pandemic situation reports, and Q&As in their in-depth news sections. Hyperlinks here played a crucial role in “providing information about information” (Deuze, 1999). Though the flu did not originate in China and was spreading more widely in the West during the sample period, Chinese websites seemed to give more background and contextual content than Western websites. In addition to the contextual information listed above, most Chinese in-depth sections had thorough definitions of WHO alerting levels, local and global pandemic situation reports, detailed prevention tips, as well as comparisons between swine flu, bird flu, and ordinary flu. These kinds of hyperlinks were rarely seen in Western in-depth sections, as the Western sites usually organized their material more simply.

Two main factors contribute to the heavy context provision at Chinese in-depth sections on swine flu. Firstly, the emphasis on context is driven by the journalistic tradition that values vividness and comprehensiveness. As evident from the Olympic case, the front page of in-depth sections was fully filled with various pieces of information and background articles. Secondly, the high emphasis here is heavily

influenced by the impact of the epidemic Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that originated in China in 2002. The mainstream media in China were blamed for withholding key information at the beginning of the outbreak which resulted in a nation-wide panic (Tai, 2006). Having learned a lesson from that incident, Chinese mainstream media paid particular attention to the coverage of swine flu. News websites took advantage of the web-based media to include as much timely information as possible to enrich the in-depth sections. Chinese mainstream media in this case tended to perform a more active role than their Western counterparts in informing the public of the outbreak and equipping the public with valuable preventative knowledge.

With regard to the use of external links, there was an overall decline (other than the NYT website) in the number of external hyperlinks on in-depth news section front pages, when compared with the first case study. In contrast to the findings of the Olympic case study that Chinese in-depth sections had a wide variety of external links, the flu section of Chinese websites either provided very limited or no external links at all. Among the six Chinese in-depth sections under analysis, only the website of CCTV offered two external hyperlinks, linking to the Ministry of Health of the PRC and the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. The other five in-depth sections had not a single external link. The findings strongly confirmed my assertion in the first case study that the Beijing Olympics had helped to strengthen a temporary cooperative media landscape in China on the one hand and intensify the competition among the internet media on the other hand. The short-term cooperative atmosphere vanished immediately after the Beijing Olympics, since the Olympic Coverage Alliances were no longer at work. Mainstream news websites in China returned back to their highly competitive status and remained cautious of letting their audience escape their domains. We can see hardly any links even to websites other than their rivals, such as websites of flu services and public health organizations. Instead, news websites in China preferred to collect information from those sites and post them on their own websites. Commercial imperatives resulted in a heavy use of internal links

and an absence of external links in most Chinese websites.

In the West, websites' use of external links was similar to that in the first case study. Other than the NYT, the websites under analysis offered very limited external links for the swine flu. NBC, the Guardian, and the NZHerald offered no external links in their in-depth sections. The BBC provided hypertexts linking to four external sites, the pandemic flu service website, WHO, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, and the UK Health Protection Agency. This linking style was similar to that found in the first case study. It seems to be a BBC practice to link externally to relevant organizations, rather than to any news websites. A prominent example in the use of external links is the NYT. It offered more than 50 external links from its in-depth section, ranging from hyperlinks to various health organizations, such as WHO, the US Dept of Health and Human services, and the Centres for Disease Control, to various news organizations, such as Reuters, CNN, *Nature* and the *Washington Post*. Viewers could gain access to related news, blogs, reports and documents via these external links. The NYT is exceptional in this aspect. It is the only site that offered far more external links for the flu case than in the Olympic case. The "navigator" subsection together with the site's "blogrunner" were responsible for much of this extended coverage from around the web. The "navigator" presented a list of resources about the topic as selected by researchers and editors at the NYT, while the "blogrunner" was an automatic monitor that tracked news events and alerted viewers to news articles and blog posts that were frequently linked to and commented upon. The navigation provided through editors' pick and the automated post monitor complemented each other and constituted a distinctive feature of the NYT site.

#### 6.4.2 Analysis within textual news items

The analysis of the hypertextuality of news within texts is divided into two parts: firstly, discussion on the use of *hyperlinks* beside the news and secondly, discussion on the use of *hypertexts* inside the news story. Most of the findings here resemble those found in the first case study. However, there are several points of divergence

that deserve further discussion, since some suggest the development of web journalism, while some indicate a retreat of online journalistic practice.

With regard to the use of hyperlinks, echoing the fashion discovered from the Olympic case, the swine flu case suggests again that Chinese news stories were *surrounded* by numerous hyperlinks whereas Western news stories were *complemented* by a few hyperlinks. The “promotion” tactic employed by Chinese websites is still more to the fore in the second case study. As described in the case study of the 2008 Olympics, hyperlinks that surround the Chinese news story might not be useful complements to the main story, but at least they are related to the topic of Olympics. However, in this case, hyperlinks beside the news of swine flu were absolutely irrelevant. Numerous hyperlinks that fully filled the right column bore relevance neither to the news story nor to the topic of swine flu. Headlines of various topics were available at the right column besides the news story. This is evident at all of the Chinese websites under study. Below the news story, there were only a few hyperlinks that related to the pandemic. Viewers needed to spot them with effort since they might be submerged in links of ads and irrelevant topics. Again, commercial imperatives seem to be the main factor in the journalistic practice elaborated above. In the West, news websites are still guided by the logic of “drilling down”. Hyperlinks beside the story would largely be selected links that enable viewers to go into the story in more depth. For example, the BBC consistently offered hyperlinks to key stories, features and analysis, and video and audio in the right column beside every piece of news on swine flu. All of these links were closely related to the main story and thus played an important role in complementing the news. Similarly, there was a long list of swine flu headlines beside news stories in the NZHerald. Following the principle of valuing quality over quantity, Western websites appear to be highly selective in choosing related hyperlinks. The NYT usually offered no more than three related news headlines below any story on swine flu and a good many articles had not a single hyperlink. The Guardian showed a similar pattern, employing limited but closely related hyperlinks beside stories. The kind of hyperlinking that was driven by

the promotion tactic only occasionally existed in some of the Anglo-American news items. The BBC's "top health stories" and the NBC's "news highlights" are a few examples.

The close examination of "clickable texts" within news stories reveals a widening gap between Chinese and Western websites in the aspect of exploring the potential of hypertexts. Compared with the general use of hypertexts in Olympic news stories, fewer Chinese websites employed hypertexts for swine flu news. Five out of six Chinese websites under analysis employed not a single hypertext within news items. NetEase, as the only website that offered hypertexts within swine flu news, constrained its hypertexts to two words solely—*jia liu* (the abbreviation of AH1N1 virus in Chinese) and H1N1. Both hypertexts were linked back to the in-depth section of swine flu at NetEase, which did little to equip users with diverse routes to consume the information. As discussed in the Olympic case study, though not in a consistent and particularly useful way, the four web portals in China at least offered hypertexts within stories. However, in this case, one can hardly spot any hypertexts embedded in the news. Given the fact that the websites studied here are the leading mainstream news websites in China, the general absence of hypertexts suggests a retreat of online journalistic practice in China. A handful of factors probably contribute to this phenomenon. Firstly, Chinese websites employed few external links, due to commercial concerns. This particular trait has greatly restrained the potential of hypertextuality in web journalism. There was little attempt to link to the websites of, for example, health organizations, government departments or service centres. The absence of external links utilization makes it difficult for online journalism in China to achieve the "self-conscious" hypertextuality and "seamless" intertextuality, which Western critics claimed to be fundamental characteristics of the web (Mitra and Cohen, 1999). Secondly, compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese mainstream news websites is relatively young and generally lacks a strong database to back up a seamless hypertextuality. A prominent website in this regard is the NYT, which leads the way in hypertext use. The "Times' Topic" pages offer archival



material on more than 14,000 subjects, dating back to 1851. Relying on its rich archive collection, the NYT website included a wide variety of textual nodes within its swine flu news stories, ranging from hypertexts of medical glossary, health organizations, and government departments, to names of experts, politicians, and celebrities. This is in line with findings from the first case study that the NYT had the most hypertexts among the examining websites. The Guardian site, which had no hypertexts for the 2008 Olympic stories, employed a large number of hypertexts for the swine flu news. Resembling the NYT in practice, the Guardian used its in-depth news sections together with its large archives to support its hypertexts.

In contrast to the findings of the Olympic case study that few websites effectively employed hypertexts to make source material accessible, the study on swine flu news sections has found progress in the indication and linking to sources. A good many websites employed hypertexts to refer viewers directly to original articles. As elaborated in the first case study, Chinese portal sites put sources as hypertexts below news headlines, but leading viewers to the front pages of the source sites. In this case study, three portal sites, namely, Sohu, NetEase and Sina, referred viewers directly to the sourced news articles via hypertexts. This practice can be seen as progress towards a clear source indication via hypertexts. A main difference between Chinese and Western websites here is the emphasis on different dimensions of the source. The authors' bylines for texts at the Guardian and the NYT are often hypertexts taking readers to more articles by that author. No Chinese websites highlighted individual authors. Instead, the hypertextual source is dominated by news organizations. As discussed earlier, this difference can largely be explained in terms of different cultural values—individualism vs. collectivism. In addition, an interesting finding here lies in how websites strategically present the source in hypertexts. For example, Sohu deliberately undercut any external source indication by displaying the source hypertext in light grey characters without underlines.

The source indication in this example from Sohu appears unclickable to the viewer. The grey characters experience no changes when one moves the mouse onto them. The findings here reveal a conflicting tactic employed by Sohu. The website wants to follow the trend of clear source indication on the one hand and on the other hand, Sohu is afraid that the external link might risk referring viewers to its rivals. Again, the commercial structure of portal sites might be the main contributing factor to the complex practice here.

To sum up, the case study on swine flu news sections has confirmed many of the findings of the Olympic case study. Hyperlink use is more driven by a promotion tactic at Chinese websites, while the employment of hyperlinks at Western websites is more driven by a “drilling down” tactic that emphasizes editorial expertise and facilitates different levels of depth. With the exception of the NYT, there were sporadic external links among all the news sections looked at. The gap between Chinese and Western websites in the use of hypertext within news is widening. The potential of hypertexts embedded in news was largely underdeveloped at Chinese websites, which can be seen as a retreat of online journalistic practice in China. A contextualized journalistic tactic is more evident in Chinese in-depth sections on swine flu, largely due to the impact of the SARS incident. The commercial structure has renegotiated web journalism practice in complex ways in Chinese websites, especially the web portals. Many employ the external hyperlinks strategically to prevent viewers escaping from their domains.

## 6.5 Textual news analysis

The research design for swine flu news analysis resembles that for the Olympic news, focusing on the amount of news coverage, the balance of media attention and the depth and breadth of news topics. The five-dimensional framework proposed by Dudo

et al. (2007), as discussed in the chapter on theory and method, is employed in this case to assist the comparison between Chinese and Western news coverage. The five perspectives, namely risk magnitude, self-efficacy, risk comparisons, sensationalism, and thematic and episodic framing are of great help to visualize the variations among international news coverage of the risk-related news coverage on swine flu.

Generally speaking, many of the findings in this case study confirm those from the Olympic case. Compared with Western websites, Chinese websites offered more news items, more timely updates, shorter and chunkier news stories within an episodic news frame, and a dual-level of context and comprehensiveness. The front page of Chinese in-depth sections on swine flu offered around 70-150 news items (Xinhuanet offered the least), whereas their Western counterparts provided around 30-100 news items (the NZHerald provided the most). The unique Chinese journalistic value and practice contributed to the large number of news items, as mentioned in the Olympic case. In pursuit of immediacy and comprehensiveness, Chinese journalists online frequently published the latest updates to the news. In fact, news websites in China competed to post the latest statistical reports about swine flu, as is elaborated below. Instead of replacing the old item, Chinese news websites accumulated usually short and chunky news items. Though speed has always been a key prerequisite of the news industry, the online journalists in China seem to be particularly concerned about timeliness and immediacy, which is evident in both case studies. An episodic news frame that focuses on a single dimension of an event dominates news content at Chinese websites. Thus, individual coverage is always short of depth and breadth, while the series of news items enclosed in the in-depth section usually paints a relatively rich picture, offering much context and background information.

In the West, news websites tend to pay less attention to timeliness. News items were not updated as often as those at Chinese sites, but were relatively long, incorporating an extensive range of information. For example, echoing previous findings, the news articles at the NYT have no time stamp; they are also usually the longest among the

Western texts. The NYT news covers information of risk magnitude, self-efficacy, risk comparisons, as well as the status of swine flu worldwide. It usually operates within a thematic news frame that synthesizes various events and useful pieces of information into a single piece of news. A pursuit of “continuing to establish and maintain standards of accuracy, balance and fairness” (Baker, 2009: 53) is evident within Western news reports, as detailed below.

With regard to the prevailing themes in news headlines, “disease-detective packages” (Dudo et al., 2007) and timely statistical reports were most common in Chinese news coverage, but they were not that favoured by Western websites. There were many disease-detective news articles closely following infected cases and additional suspected cases at Chinese websites. News coverage as of the beginning of July paid particular attention to newly occurred swine flu cases in China, in response to the containment policy promoted by the government. Exhaustive information about swine flu patients, including age, gender, nationality, occupation, symptoms, and detailed tracking of their travel dominated news stories. Along with the textual news, video coverage even offered footage from surveillance cameras, showing places the victim had visited. News coverage closely tracked at least the first 60 swine flu cases in China and called the public’s attention to isolate themselves or report to a health centre if they had had any contact with victims. Moreover, there is an obvious blaming tone in some of the news articles covering infected people from overseas who were travelling around. For example, the 14<sup>th</sup> swine flu patient in mainland China was blamed for “deliberately” spreading the virus. The news<sup>145</sup> reported that the man (referred to as the 14<sup>th</sup> victim) arrived in Beijing with flu symptoms, but he neither stayed in isolation nor reported to a disease centre. Instead, he travelled around Beijing and had closely contact with 88 people. The coverage detailed the health department’s effort in tracking those people and reminded the public to monitor themselves for flu-like symptoms. Furthermore, various feature stories of this kind

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<sup>145</sup> Available at all the Chinese websites under analysis, for example <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-06-19/215918055607.shtml> (accessed 21 June 2009).

were placed in prominent places in the in-depth section. For example, stories including apologies from victims’ parents, proposals to delay or cancel recent travel plans if possible, as well as stories of self-isolation, were highlighted within the news sections. Further discussion of feature stories was discussed in the section on interactivity, since blogs and discussion forums played an active role in this dimension.

In addition to these “disease-detective” news packages, dramatic figures and statistical reports dominated the in-depth sections in China during the entire sample period. The statistical report on swine flu cases was a daily routine on the Chinese in-depth news section and was always placed as the top news. Taking Sina’s news as an example, 37 out of 72 sampled news pieces<sup>146</sup> were reporting the numbers of the infected, with a particular emphasis on the increase of confirmed cases in China. Similarly, the news topping the in-depth section of NetEase, Tencent and Sohu was overwhelmingly about deaths, severe cases, newly infected, and soaring increases in numbers. This kind of information builds up a “worst-case scenario” that is closely related to sensationalism in news coverage (Friedman et al., 1987). Moreover, Xinhuanet usually highlighted the latest statistic report by utilizing sizeable headlines in bold characters, as shown below.

News headlines at Xinhuanet<sup>147</sup>:



<sup>146</sup> The 72 news articles sampled were the top news at Sina’s pandemic section, defined as the top two pieces daily across the 36 research period.

<sup>147</sup> Available at: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/yfzlg> (accessed 16 July 2009).

The news headline (in blue) in the middle of the snapshot reads “The number of people infected globally probably passes a million”. On the basis of a British journal paper and the estimates of US health officials, this news article reports that swine flu infections were far higher than cases actually reported to the authorities. Through the close tracking of swine flu cases and the highlighting of dramatic figures in news headlines, Chinese in-depth sections constructed a tense mood around the H1N1 influenza outbreak.

The disease-detective package and statistical report were not that favoured in Western in-depth sections on swine flu. The study of news headlines finds a low proportion of the above two themes in Western news coverage. Within the sample period, among the total of 102 news headlines at the in-depth section of the NZHerald, only 18 news headlines were filled with (not that dramatic) figures and none resembled the trend of a disease-detective package that included exhaustive information of the patients and suspected cases. Moreover, it is interesting to find that quite a few news headlines at the NZHerald’s swine flu section were closely related to the nation’s favourite game—rugby. News headlines indicated that “All Blacks cautious about swine flu”,<sup>148</sup> but “NRL: Tonight’s game on, despite flu scare”,<sup>149</sup> and “Sick fans urged to avoid Eden Park”.<sup>150</sup> Furthermore, a number of news headlines actually gave reassuring messages, for example, “Minister: NZ can cope with flu”,<sup>151</sup> “Healthy staff sent home over swine flu could be paid—lawyer”,<sup>152</sup> “Few Kiwis concerned about swine flu:

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<sup>148</sup> Available at:  
[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10578951](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10578951) (accessed 17 June 2009).

<sup>149</sup> Available at:  
[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10578017](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10578017) (accessed 12 June 2009).

<sup>150</sup> Available at:  
[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10584752](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10584752) (accessed 16 July 2009).

<sup>151</sup> Available at:  
[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10580288](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10580288) (accessed 24 June 2009).

<sup>152</sup> Available at:  
[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10579005](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10579005) (accessed 17 June 2009).

Poll”,<sup>153</sup> and even “For some, flu scare is turning sunny side up”.<sup>154</sup> The latter news described poultry farmers as “winners from the swine flu pandemic”, since “millions of hen eggs were being used to grow the cells from which the vaccine is made”. Rather than painting a bleak picture, a good many news headlines at the NZHerald cheer people up by presenting the “sunny side”.

Similarly, headlines in the UK were mainly framing in terms of reassurance. The Guardian’s headlines suggest that swine flu was not that dreadful, as “Malaria is more deadly than swine flu”<sup>155</sup> and “swine flu is officially a pandemic. But don’t worry ... not yet, anyway”.<sup>156</sup> A “Doctor who died after contracting swine flu was not killed by the virus”,<sup>157</sup> and “Schools stay open despite swine flu outbreaks”,<sup>158</sup> which suggest that “These swine flu deaths do not mean it’s 1986 all over again”.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, the UK was confident in combating the H1N1 virus—“Swine flu’s at my gate. But I’m not afraid”,<sup>160</sup> “We are well prepared for swine flu”<sup>161</sup> and “Swine flu: We’re coping just fine”.<sup>162</sup> In the US, rather than concentrating on its own territory, the news coverage of the NYT showed a more global outlook. Over the research period, the total of 29 news articles at the NYT contained 9 news pieces focusing on swine flu’s status in countries other than the US. In particular, Argentina received the most attention. As many as five news articles specifically painted a critical picture of the

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<sup>153</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/news/article.cfm?l\\_id=325&objectid=10580260](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/news/article.cfm?l_id=325&objectid=10580260) (accessed 23 June 2009).

<sup>154</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10580817](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10580817) (accessed 28 June 2009).

<sup>155</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jun/12/swine-flu-malaria> (accessed 12 June 2009).

<sup>156</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/14/swine-flu-pandemic-vaccine-influenza> (accessed 14 June 2009).

<sup>157</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/14/swine-flu-warning-burnham-perspective> (accessed 14 July 2009).

<sup>158</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/22/schools-open-despite-swine-flu> (accessed 22 June 2009).

<sup>159</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/14/swine-flu-britain> (accessed 14 July 2009).

<sup>160</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/05/swine-flu-health-pandemic> (accessed 5 July 2009).

<sup>161</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jun/11/swine-flu> (accessed 11 June 2009).

<sup>162</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/15/swine-flu-government> (accessed 15 July 2009).

disease in Argentina —“Swine flu death toll in Argentina climbs”,<sup>163</sup> “Argentines question vote during outbreak”,<sup>164</sup> “Argentina: Swine flu’s spread leads to school closings”,<sup>165</sup> “Argentina: Health minister resigns over handling of flu cases”<sup>166</sup> and “Argentina baby dies of swine flu”.<sup>167</sup> The news “Swine flu death toll in Argentina climbs” quoted doctors and private health officials to indicate that the government of Argentina “has been slow in confirming cases” and “Argentina was ill-prepared for the global swine flu pandemic”. There were 4 news stories relating to Denmark, Asia, Israel and Pan-America respectively. As such, much attention on swine flu was transferred to its spread in other nations and an assurance framing was achieved via less US media attention on the status of its own territory, despite the US being one of the most seriously affected nations during the research period.

In fact, it is interesting to discover that contradictory framing strategies were employed by Chinese and Western news websites. The coverage of the swine flu’s status in China was very intense among Chinese news websites, though the H1N1 virus had not seriously hit China during the research period (with about a thousand infections and no reported deaths). Dramatic numbers and disease-detective news packages were not evident through Western coverage. On the contrary, news in the UK and New Zealand signaled reassuring messages and coverage in the US transferred attention to swine flu’s spread in other nations, even though the Western countries analyzed here, especially the US (with about a million of infections and dozens of deaths), had been more seriously affected than China.

The analysis above focuses on news headlines on swine flu. The following paragraphs

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<sup>163</sup> Available at: [www.nytimes.com/2009/07/04/world/americas/04argentina.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/04/world/americas/04argentina.html) (accessed 4 July 2009).

<sup>164</sup> Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/02/world/americas/02argentina.html> (accessed 1 July 2009).

<sup>165</sup> Available at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E01E3D81E3EF932A35754C0A96F9C8B63> (accessed 1 July 2009).

<sup>166</sup> Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/30/world/americas/30flubrief.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/30/world/americas/30flubrief.html?_r=1) (accessed 30 June 2009).

<sup>167</sup> Available at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9904E5DB1631F935A25755C0A96F9C8B63> (accessed 16 June 2009).



are devoted to a close examination of news content, based on the five-dimensional framework of risk-related coverage (Dudo et al., 2007). Five aspects, namely, risk magnitude, self-efficacy, risk comparisons, sensationalism, and thematic and episodic framing are employed to visualize the differences in Chinese and Western news coverage of swine flu.

### *Risk-magnitude information*

The study here discovers that Western coverage paid particular attention to “contextual precision” and hence reveals an emphasis on a reassurance discourse, whereas Chinese news examined here offered a large amount of qualitative descriptions together with fewer “contextual denominators”, which indicates a critical swine flu status and a threat-warning discourse. The quantitative risk information with denominators, which has been highlighted by Dudo et al. (2007) as a high level of contextual precision, was evident in much of the Western coverage under study. The reporting of death tolls was always accompanied by contextual denominators, such as the number of confirmed or suspected cases as well as the number hospitalized. For example, the news report (on June 27) of NBC, the BBC and the Guardian goes, according to the latest figures from the WHO, there have been 263 deaths and nearly 60,000 cases in some 100 countries and territories. Additionally, in the news story covering an elderly man who had died with swine flu, the BBC underlined the medical officer’s words that though it was a “tragedy”, “it was only the second death from swine flu in well over 4,000 cases in the UK”.<sup>168</sup> The NZHerald quoted the Ministry of Health’s estimates that “half the population could catch the pandemic virus and that the number of deaths is not likely to exceed 200 and may be substantially lower”.<sup>169</sup>

More importantly, besides the provision of contextual denominators, the contextual

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<sup>168</sup> Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/scotland/glasgow\\_and\\_west/8122910.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/glasgow_and_west/8122910.stm) (accessed 28 June 2009).

<sup>169</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10580611](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10580611) (accessed 25 June 2009).

precision in Western news articles on swine flu was achieved through critical analysis of statistical reports. Mainstream media in the West usually critically analyzed figures shown in statistical reports, explaining the implications of the figures or questioning whether the figure is typical and a meaningful indicator. I contend that the interpretation of figures plays a more crucial role than denominators in the aspect of providing contextual precision. Western news coverage under study seems to pay particular attention to this aspect. For example, the NYT reported that of the 3,000 Americans contracting swine flu who had been hospitalized, the median age was quite young (just 19) and of the 127 who have died, the median age was somewhat higher, at 37. However, the news coverage did not halt there; it continued explaining why the median age for deaths was somewhat higher—“that number is pushed up because while only a few elderly people catch the new flu, about 2 percent of them die as a result.” In this way, the number was put in a meaningful context. Similarly, within the news coverage of “Numbers crunchers put their spin on flu toll”,<sup>170</sup> the NZHerald not only presented figures from the authorities but also interpreted and compared the Treasury figure with the Ministry of Health’s estimates:

The Treasury says that although much is uncertain about how swine influenza may evolve, based on the mild scenario possibly 30 per cent could become infected, of whom 0.25 per cent could die. That suggests more than 1.2 million people could be infected, of whom 3200 could die. However, the Ministry of Health’s latest estimates—contained in a document circulated to the health sector on Friday by Steve Brazier of the National Health Co-ordination Centre—are that half the population could catch the pandemic virus and that the number of deaths is not likely to exceed 200 and may be substantially lower.

Instead of simply quoting the authoritative document, the NZHerald played a mediated role here, interpreting the statistic figure (e.g. 30 percent and 0.25 percent) into more clear and meaningful information (e.g. “That suggests...”) and also

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<sup>170</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/public-healthcare/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=294&objectid=10580611](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/public-healthcare/news/article.cfm?c_id=294&objectid=10580611) (accessed 26 June 2009).

complementing the information with other latest estimates (“The Treasury says... However, the Ministry of Health’s latest estimates...”).

Compared with the Western coverage, Chinese news online seemed to pay little attention to this kind of contextual precision. As mentioned above, top headlines at Chinese in-depth sections were overwhelmingly about figures, such as the increased number of confirmed cases. Within the quantitative information, little was offered in terms of contextual denominators. For example, a typical news report of Chinese news websites goes:

According to the Ministry of Health of P.R.C., the mainland China had increased 42 confirmed swine flu infections, from 24 June (18:00) to 25 June (18:00). Among the confirmed cases, Beijing had reported 10 cases, Guangzhou had reported 7... There were 570 confirmed swine flu cases in mainland China so far, and 321 had been discharged from hospital and 249 were in hospital.<sup>171</sup>

As is evident here, Chinese reports on swine flu solely focused on the steep rise in the numbers of swine flu cases and the wide spread nature of the influenza. The report failed to provide useful contextual denominators, such as the population of China, the population within Beijing city, or the general number of annual seasonal flu patients, to help paint an accurate picture of the risk-magnitude information. Moreover, Chinese online coverage of quantitative information on swine flu mostly duplicates authoritative statistics. The news coverage largely quoted documents from the Ministry of Health and offered very little or absolutely no interpretation and comparison. This feature reveals Chinese media’s deep reliance on the authorities. Mainstream news websites, as part of the overall Chinese media system, are no different from traditional media in terms of their triple responsibilities—as

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<sup>171</sup> Translated by the author, available at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/h/2009-06-25/192718094428.shtml> (accessed 25 June 2009).

propaganda tool, market competitors and the public-service provider, as introduced earlier. The internet serves as a valuable means for alternative information but that does not necessarily mean that the internet has empowered the web-based media to seriously challenge the authorities. In most cases, especially during big national events, mainstream journalism online has greatly relied on news feeds from relevant authoritative departments and national news agencies.

### *Self-efficacy information*

As mentioned in the literature review, two kinds of information are considered as important indicators for increasing self-efficacy concerning infectious diseases: descriptions of symptoms and measures of personal protection (Roche and Muskavitch, 2003). The close examination here finds a large amount of information on symptom descriptions and protection measures existing at the front pages of in-depth sections on swine flu. This finding does not support results from previous empirical studies (e.g. Dudo et al., 2007) that little self-efficacy information was presented at newspaper stories on avian flu. The online environment seems to have much more space than the press to present such information. Except for the website of the *NZ Herald*, all the websites under analysis offered detailed descriptions of swine flu symptoms and protection tips. The difference between Chinese and Western websites in this regard lies in the different forms of this information. Chinese in-depth sections favoured graphic illustrations, such as cartoons, animations and tables, to present the self-efficacy information, while Western in-depth sections preferred textual descriptions with modest graphics.

Symptoms and protection tips from Sina and NetEase:



The self-efficacy information was displayed in various forms at Chinese in-depth sections, such as the vivid illustrations above. In the West, journalists online preferred the much more plain Q&As to detail symptoms and protection measures. The BBC, the Guardian, the NYT and NBC all placed their Q&As about swine flu in prominent places. The finding here reveals the different applications of graphic values, as mentioned earlier. The reluctance of using large graphics to illustrate the self-efficacy information (that can be clearly presented in texts) in the West indicates the logic of

employing graphics to tell part of the story that cannot easily be told in pure texts (Zelizer, 2005). Within Chinese websites, the use of large graphics often reflects the level of importance and the impact of images is invoked as an “impetus for compelling the public attention” (Zelizer, 2005).

The examination of news stories themselves finds that self-efficacy information was rarely shown within Chinese online news and was occasionally presented in Western coverage of swine flu. Chinese online coverage usually briefly mentioned the symptoms of swine flu patients at the beginning of news stories. Protection measures were mostly excluded from Chinese news coverage. Comparatively, Western coverage embedded more self-efficacy information within news stories. For example, the news “Plan aims to delay pandemic”<sup>172</sup> at the NZHerald, not only described the government’s efforts to avoid the pandemic after the WHO’s declaration of the pandemic, but also provided a document listing “What you need to know about swine flu” to help the public fight against the influenza. Another news story at the NZHerald, “Health chief: stay off work if you feel ill”,<sup>173</sup> reminded people to be aware of the illness and to stay away from work if they felt ill, as workplaces could easily be breeding grounds for the swine flu virus. Within this news story, viewers might expect to read information describing the symptoms associated with swine flu so as to assess if they should stay away from work, but the news coverage failed to offer any of this kind of information. Additionally, this news story could be more informative if it had included measures that might be taken to decrease the likelihood of infection at workplaces, for example, putting sanitizing gels at prominent places and avoiding crowds, as suggested in other news websites. As to the BBC, beside a handful of news items, protection tips were available and adjusted according to the news content, for example, for elderly people, or for parents. In the US, the NBC and NYT websites

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<sup>172</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10578204](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10578204) (accessed 13 June 2009).

<sup>173</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10577782](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10577782) (accessed 11 June 2009).

rarely embedded self-efficacy information within news articles, especially protection measures. From the analysis above, it can be generally summarized that the self-efficacy information commonly existed at news websites, but was treated as a separate aspect to news coverage online. As descriptions of symptoms and protection tips were available in prominent places online (e.g. the front page of in-depth sections on swine flu), news coverage by and large contained little self-efficacy information.

### *Risk-comparison information*

The study of media coverage of swine flu finds that risk-comparison information was widely shown in both Chinese and Western news, while different discourses were exhibited from the risk-comparison information. By comparing swine flu with other infectious diseases, Western coverage presented a reassurance discourse, whereas Chinese news displayed a threat-warning discourse. Examples of commonly used risk comparisons in the West comprised references to other strains of influenza, such as seasonal flu, the 1918 Spanish flu, the Asian flu of 1957 and 1959, as well as the Hong Kong flu of 1969. The comparison among Western coverage reassured the public that although it was relatively new, the A H1N1 strain was not dreadful. For example, the NYT's coverage frequently reminded viewers that though swine flu spreads rapidly, "one of the usual seasonal flu, an H3N2, is also active".<sup>174</sup> Covering the "Increase in Welsh swine flu cases",<sup>175</sup> the BBC news pointed out that "we must remember that every year there are deaths from complications of seasonal flu". With regard to the potential economic impact of swine flu on New Zealand, the NZHerald news summarized a Treasury paper and indicated "assumptions for a "severe scenario", based on the 1918 flu pandemic, and a "mild scenario" based on the 1957 and 1968 pandemics".<sup>176</sup> Another news article at the NZHerald site, "Plan aims to

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<sup>174</sup> Available at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0CE0D61638F934A15755C0A96F9C8B63> (accessed 27 June 2009).

<sup>175</sup> Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/wales/8161219.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/8161219.stm) (accessed 21 July 2009).

<sup>176</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10580611](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10580611) (accessed 25 June 2009).

delay pandemic”,<sup>177</sup> mentioned all of the above influenza outbreaks when covering the H1N1 pandemic. More importantly, by underlining the comparison between swine flu and other infectious diseases, the seasonal flu in particular, the Anglo-American coverage repeatedly mentioned the relatively low rate of swine-flu-related deaths so far compared to other pandemics. For example, one news item at the NZHerald stated about 2 percent of swine flu cases would develop into severe illness (based on the estimate from the WHO), and “seasonal flu affected about 10 percent of people each year and caused around 400 deaths”.<sup>178</sup> Even “Malaria is more deadly than swine flu”,<sup>179</sup> as the Guardian reporter pointed out when comparing the H1N1 virus with the HIV virus and drug-resistant malaria parasites that killed millions.

In contrast, risk-comparison information in Chinese coverage suggested that swine flu was more dreadful when compared with other diseases. According to the information at QQ,<sup>180</sup> the assertion that “H1N1 influenza has a lower rate of death than seasonal flu” is wrong, since swine flu killed more young people than the old and so far, the number of young people who had died from swine flu this year has exceeded the number of young people who had died from seasonal flu. Similarly, the comparison information at Sohu<sup>181</sup> told viewers that “the death rate of H1N1 influenza was as high as 6.77 percent, which is higher than ordinary flu”. However, the website failed to offer the exact death rate of ordinary flu; instead, it said that ordinary flu could be fatal, but the rate of death was relatively low. Despite the accuracy of the information, it is evident that the discourse revealed from the comparison between swine flu and seasonal flu at Chinese websites contradicted the Western one, painting H1N1 influenza as severe. Another commonly mentioned disease among Chinese coverage

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<sup>177</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10578204](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10578204) (accessed 13 June 2009).

<sup>178</sup> Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10580611](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10580611) (accessed 25 June 2009).

<sup>179</sup> Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jun/12/swine-flu-malaria> (accessed 12 June 2009).

<sup>180</sup> Available at: <http://news.qq.com/zt/2009/zlq> (accessed 15 July 2009).

<sup>181</sup> Available at: <http://news.sohu.com/s2009/zhuliuganyiqing> (accessed 15 July 2009).



on swine flu was the SARS epidemic.<sup>182</sup> Owing to its significant impact on Chinese society, SARS was compared with H1N1 influenza among most of Chinese news websites, though it (known as atypical pneumonia) dramatically differs from swine flu. News websites, Sohu and NetEase as examples, compared swine flu with SARS in a number of aspects, such as symptoms, death rates, protection measures, the route of infection and so on. News at these websites reminded viewers that swine flu was more horrible in terms of its faster transmission and the higher death rate among young people. This detailed comparison between swine flu and SARS was distinctive of the Chinese in-depth sections on swine flu, while none of the Western in-depth sections under study had such a comparison. This difference can be largely explained in terms of different social contexts. SARS was a crucial event in China and had a considerable impact on Chinese society (*People's Daily* online, 22 August 2003). Thus SARS has become a referential point when discussing severe medical issue, despite the limited extent of similarity between the outbreaks.

### *Sensational information*

The close examination of news about swine flu shows that the Chinese coverage tends to be more sensational than the Western coverage. Loaded words, such as “severe”, “urging”, “attack”, “deadly”, etc., were widely used in Chinese coverage and the description of worst cases usually had little further information. News at Chinese websites repeatedly highlighted the message that “Further spread of the pandemic is inevitable”,<sup>183</sup> “Swine flu cannot be contained, the British government announced”,<sup>184</sup> “The swine flu status is increasingly severe”,<sup>185</sup> “Swine flu patients who refuse to be quarantined will be taken into custody”,<sup>186</sup> “Swine flu shows drug resistance”,<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Known as atypical pneumonia in China, the disease was defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). It first broke out in South China's Guangdong province in November 2002.

<sup>183</sup> Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2009-07/15/content\\_11709523.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2009-07/15/content_11709523.htm) (accessed 16 July 2009).

<sup>184</sup> Available at: <http://video.sina.com.cn/news/w/v/2009-07-03/144840255.shtml> (accessed 5 July 2009).

<sup>185</sup> Available at: <http://news.cctv.com/world/20090612/103832.shtml> (accessed 14 June 2009).

<sup>186</sup> Available at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-06-25/070018090054.shtml> (accessed 25 June 2009).

<sup>187</sup> Available at: <http://news.sohu.com/20090630/n264857890.shtml> (accessed 30 June 2009).

“Swine flu deaths will possibly exist in China”,<sup>188</sup> “Steer jump in global swine flu deaths”<sup>189</sup> and so on. With regard to the Western coverage, loaded words were sporadically shown in news stories, and more importantly, a large amount of further explanation was provided to complement the news covering deaths or severe situations. For example, when the BBC reported the first case of swine flu that showed drug resistance, the news underlined the expert’s words that “it was not unexpected given that common seasonal flu could do the same”.<sup>190</sup> Then the description of death cases was often followed by phrases such as “underlying health problems”, “not known if flu contributed to the death”, as well as reassuring messages such as “most of cases with swine flu are mild/not severe”. The following are a few examples in this regard, drawn from the Anglo-American news websites under study:

NHS West Midlands said the girl, who had other serious health problems, died on Friday evening. It is not known if flu contributed to her death.<sup>191</sup>

The cases of swine flu found in the UK have so far been generally mild in most people, but are proving to be severe in a small minority of cases.<sup>192</sup>

Swine flu has infected more than a million Americans, ... three quarters of those who die have some underlying condition such as morbid obesity, pregnancy, asthma, diabetes or immune system problems.<sup>193</sup>

None of the sick cadets have been hospitalized so far, and Mr. Van Winkle described all of the cases as moderate.<sup>194</sup>

The current pandemic of swine flu is regarded as moderate so far in New Zealand – the virus is highly infectious and spreads easily in the community, but for most people it causes only

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<sup>188</sup> Available at: <http://news.sohu.com/20090630/n264854938.shtml> (accessed 2 July 2009).

<sup>189</sup> Available at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/w/2009-06-12/083218004545.shtml> (accessed 12 June 2009).

<sup>190</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8124987.stm> (accessed 30 June 2009).

<sup>191</sup> Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/west\\_midlands/8124781.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/england/west_midlands/8124781.stm) (accessed 30 June 2009).

<sup>192</sup> Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/health/8121292.stm> (accessed 30 June 2009).

<sup>193</sup> Available at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0CE0D61638F934A15755C0A96F9C8B63> (accessed 28 June 2009).

<sup>194</sup> Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/15/us/15flu.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/15/us/15flu.html?_r=1) (accessed 15 July 2009).

mild to moderate symptoms, although these can still be unpleasant.<sup>195</sup>

As evident from the above examples, Western news on swine flu employed fewer loaded words and tried to comfort viewers with reassurance information when reporting the worst cases. Comparatively, Chinese online coverage on swine flu seems to be more sensational, including more emotionally-charged words and devoting particular attention to worst cases.

### *Episodic and thematic content*

Using Iyengar's (1991) model of episodic and thematic news content, Chinese news stories are more likely to be episodic in news frame and the Western news coverage is more likely to be thematic in news frame. News stories at Chinese websites are usually shorter and chunkier, focusing specifically on events, rather than ideas or issues. Comparatively, Western news websites showed more synthesized events and background information within news stories. A few examples are listed here to further explore this finding. With regard to the news about the increase of swine flu cases, Chinese coverage paid particular attention to the latest figures (e.g. the number of increasing cases, those hospitalized, and those discharged), the district (e.g. three in Beijing), the period of time (e.g. 72 confirmed cases from 6:00pm 7 July to 6:00pm 9 July), and tracking information (e.g. "The 15<sup>th</sup> swine flu carrier in Tianjin is a Philippine male, taking the flight from Philippines to Tianjin. He had cough and fever on board."<sup>196</sup>). As evident here, the news report at Chinese websites emphasizes the specific event of the increasing number of cases. The journalistic practice is quite different in the West. For example, within the coverage "Swine flu cases soar in England", BBC News reported more than the statistical information on increasing numbers of cases. The news also mentioned the medical officer's prediction of more cases emerging each week by the autumn and the official announcement of a change

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Available

at:

[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1502821&objectid=10580611](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/swine-flu/news/article.cfm?c_id=1502821&objectid=10580611)

(accessed 25 June 2009).

<sup>196</sup> Available at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/h/2009-07-09/221918189213.shtml> (accessed 9 July 2009).

of policy, from containing the spread of the virus to managing the outbreak. Such a news piece clearly belongs to the thematic news frame and would be probably divided into at least three news pieces at Chinese news websites. Similarly, the NZHerald news, “NZ’s confirmed swine flu tally climbs to 303”,<sup>197</sup> presented three specific issues—the rapidly rising number of confirmed cases in New Zealand, the confident response from the Ministry of Health, and the possibility of more infections. The NYT has synthesized more events and background information in its news coverage on the increasing outbreak. The news, “Swine flu cases in the US pass a million, officials say”,<sup>198</sup> reported the figure announced by federal health officials, the estimated number based on testing plus telephone surveys by the CDCP, the rapid spread in other countries, and the progress of vaccine-making. The typical news story at the NYT is usually longer than news at other websites under analysis, synthesizing quite a few events with contextual background, which is a typical thematic frame.

Findings here are in line with the finding from the case study of the Olympic coverage. The generally chunky and short news stories at the Chinese websites clearly present an episodic news frame, while their Western counterparts are more likely to be thematic news content. It is a distinctive characteristic of Chinese web journalism that the news story focuses specifically on individual events, and much background information together with various news stories would compose an in-depth news section on a given issue or topic. In a word, in the Chinese online environment, news reports are overwhelmingly dominated by episodic content and in-depth sections play an important role of gathering these together into something more thematic.

## 6.6 Chapter summary

The study of the online news coverage on H1N1 influenza suggests that the Olympic

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<sup>197</sup> Available at:  
[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/immunisations/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=461&objectid=10580049&pnum=1](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/immunisations/news/article.cfm?c_id=461&objectid=10580049&pnum=1)  
(accessed 22 June 2009).

<sup>198</sup> Available at:  
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0CE0D61638F934A15755C0A96F9C8B63> (accessed 27 June 2009).

case might be a prominent example in terms of the dramatic audio-video usage, but it is not an exceptional case that depicts a completely different landscape of web journalism globally. Rather, the Olympic case stands with the influenza case in revealing significant differences between Chinese and Western mainstream news websites as well as between Chinese and Western journalistic logics online.

With regard to the use of multimedia, distinctive characteristics of Chinese web journalism, as evident in both cases, can be summarized as the high use of images, the hierarchical structure of photo subsections, and the dominance of shovelware and repurposed content. The finding of the influenza case indicates that the high use of images was a journalistic tradition in China and it was not just because the Olympics was a highly visual event. For swine flu coverage, all Chinese in-depth sections under study had specific photo subsections that visualized the outbreak and the spread of the epidemic worldwide. Hospitals, patients, injections, crowds with masks, and the like were taken into pictures. High definition images, interactive graphics and slide show were available at photo subsections. All of these findings reveal that Chinese in-depth news sections see photos and graphics as important components of the web news genre. The value of news images lies largely in indicating the importance of the event and compelling the public attention, instead of telling stories that are not well told in texts and reflecting wider cultural themes (Zelizer, 2004). Concerning the absence of audio content in the flu coverage and the relatively small amount of audio coverage in the Olympic case, it can be roughly concluded that mainstream news websites in China generally prefer video to audio clips. The prevailing stand-alone audio model more or less contributes to the unpopularity of audio coverage. Owing to the ever-increasing number of broadband users, Chinese news websites are more interested in investing in the video stream that is believed to be more attractive than the audio clip. It becomes clear in the swine flu case study that shovelware and repurposed materials predominate in the video coverage. Web-generated video items, though they were occasionally shown in the Olympic case, were rarely seen within the flu case. An economic imperative might be at work here. Video provision is both time

and resource consuming, thus news websites probably see the Olympic Games as more worthwhile investing in than the pandemic case. Multimedia news packages are by and large underdeveloped in this case study. The most common kind of package is the combination of texts and pictures; most video content was shown in a stand-alone media player that incorporated neither texts nor pictures. Generally speaking, the disease nature of this case has largely constrained the development of multimedia packages, since the influenza is told mostly in figures as well as in official and medical texts.

The finding on the interactivity of news websites in this case study basically resembles that of the Olympic case, except for the absence of highly active interactivity. Chinese in-depth sections on swine flu offered fewer inactive interactivity options than their Western counterparts. Devices such as archives, search engines, text-adjustment and mobile versions were favoured by Chinese sites, while the RSS, printable version and social sharing website links that were widely employed by Western websites were not very popular among Chinese websites. The different journalistic logics are clear here. The portal logic has driven Chinese websites making little use of social network and bookmarking links that would risk letting users escape their domain. Whereas, the Western news organizations employed more social bookmarking links in order to become prominent within powerful social networks. Such a fashion is indeed more evident in the analysis of active interactivity. All Chinese websites under analysis actively encouraged netizens' contributions and participation by offering platforms for blogs, vlogs, discussion and comments. Two portal sites, Sina and QQ, provided Weibo (Twitter) service for netizens. Almost being immersed in numerous netizens and celebrities' contributions, blogs, tweets and vlogs created by journalists were not prominent in this case. In contrast, the Web 2.0 platforms offered by Western mainstream news websites were mostly reserved for journalistic professionals, rather than ordinary internet users. News organizations in the West would guide users to other providers of those services via hyperlinks. Hermida and Thurman attribute the conservativeness of adopting user generated

content within Western mainstream news organizations as due to “editors’ persistent concerns about reputation, trust, and legal liabilities” (2008: 343).

Additionally, an interesting finding of the active interactivity analysis is the contrast between Chinese and Western websites in facilitating interpersonal communication. Chinese websites actively arranged live chat rooms for communication between netizens and health authorities or medical professionals, as a response to the government’s containment policy. On the contrary, Western media seemed to be reluctant to set up such synchronous communication online when governments were actively managing swine flu. As elaborated in the analysis, cultural differences as well as complexities of the media system in China go some way to explain this discrepancy. Media in China are closely associated with the government and “stand in harmony with Confucian philosophy, which stresses consensus and cooperation” (Heuvel and Dennis, 1993: iii), while the Western media are dedicated “to individual freedom and rights” (Heuvel and Dennis, 1993: iii) and cautiously avoid being too close to the government.

The absence of the highly active interactivity in this case study can be largely explained in terms of the disease nature of this case. During the epidemic, people tried to reduce human interactions to a large extent and thus stayed away from crowds and populous activities. As such, mainstream news websites were not interested in organizing offline activities during the influenza pandemic. It would be helpful in later research to analyze another case that neither has relevance to the Games nor to the disease, so as to confirm whether the highly active interactivity is a common practice in Chinese mainstream news websites.

In terms of the utilization of hypertextuality, this case study confirms a handful of findings drawn from the Olympic case. Within the front page of in-depth sections, a contextualized journalistic tactic is more evident in Chinese flu sections, while Western sites employed fewer hyperlinks and organized their material more simply.

Within the webpage of news stories, the use of hyperlinks is more driven by a promotion tactic at Chinese websites, while the employment of hyperlinks at Western websites is more driven by a “drilling down” tactic that emphasizes editorial expertise and facilitates different levels of depth. In addition, except for the NYT, there were only sporadic external links among all the news sections. The interconnection of Chinese news websites via external links that was found in the Olympic case vanished immediately after the Beijing Olympics, since the Olympic Coverage Alliances were no longer at work. As evident in this case, Chinese news websites returned back to their highly competitive status and remained cautious of letting their audience escape their domains. Furthermore, the gap of hypertext utilization within news is widening between Chinese and Western websites. The potential of hypertexts embedded in news has been undeveloped by Chinese websites. Five out of six Chinese websites under analysis employed not a single hypertext within swine flu news stories. The presumption of “self-conscious” hypertextuality and “seamless” intertextuality via links in the text (Mitra and Cohen, 1999) seems to be a far-fetched myth as far as Chinese mainstream news websites are concerned. The commercial concern has constrained the use of external links, while the relatively young database of their own news cannot easily support a wide variety of textual nodes. The two factors are major factors in the underdevelopment of the use of hypertexts at mainstream news websites in China.

Lastly, the textual news analysis on swine flu coverage reveals different discourses as well as different journalistic values between Chinese and Western mainstream news websites. In China, few contextual denominators were offered along with risk-magnitude information. The comparison between swine flu and other outbreaks shows a particular emphasis on the faster transmission of the H1N1 virus as well as the higher death rate among the young. Loaded words and phrases were widely employed in news stories. All of these features contributed to a picture of swine flu as a high risk and a threat-warning discourse. In contrast, the Western in-depth sections paid particular attention to providing contexts (through both contextual denominators



and critical analysis of statistical reports) to risk-magnitude information. The comparison between swine flu and other influenzas reveals a relatively low rate of death directly owing to the H1N1 virus. Loaded words were sporadically shown in news stories and further explanation was often provided to complement the news covering deaths or severe situations. Thus Western coverage mainly depicted a mild risk and reassurance discourse.

Driven by the pursuit of timely updates, Chinese news content is generally dominated by an episodic news frame that focuses specifically on the individual event; whereas, balance and variety tends to be the driving force of Western news coverage, and thus news stories mostly show a thematic news frame. This finding is in line with the discovery from the Olympic case that Chinese news websites give a high priority to immediacy. The differences between Chinese and Western news coverage elaborated above can be largely explained in terms of political, historical and social realities. During the research period, different policies against the H1N1 influenza were employed by the authorities owing to the different social and historical backgrounds. The Chinese health authorities were criticized for failing to react promptly and openly in the 2002-3 outbreak of the respiratory disease SARS. Therefore, the authorities this time followed a tight containment policy since the outbreak of swine flu in April 2008, and not until July, did the authorities adjust the stringent monitoring policy towards mitigation measures. Nevertheless, acknowledging the large population and relatively poor health care system in the rural areas, the Chinese authorities still attached great importance to combating the H1N1 influenza since July. In comparison with the intense attention paid to swine flu in China, the three Western countries seemed to be much more relaxed on the H1N1 influenza. Authorities in the US, UK and New Zealand opposed the containment policy since the early days of the outbreak, in respond to the advice given by the WHO specialist<sup>199</sup> in April that containing flu was not feasible. The different political, social and historical factors have probably

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<sup>199</sup> Dr. Keiji Fukuda, deputy director general of the WHO, announced on April 30, "Containment is no longer a feasible option". Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/30/health/30contain.html? r=1> (accessed 12 June 2009).

contributed to shaping the distinction between Chinese and Western online coverage in aspects of media values and news discourses.

To sum up, the influenza case study proves to be very useful to the entire research. It not only confirms a good many findings and propositions made in the Olympic case study, but also contributes to discoveries that are absent from or contrast with the findings of the Olympic case study. Therefore, this case study helps detect the case-specific features and thus helps with a more generalizable conclusion. In the conclusion chapter, more detailed elaboration will be devoted to the discussion of the genuine characteristics of Chinese web journalism overall, the general characteristics of Chinese web journalism, and the case-specific characteristics as well.

## 7. Implications and conclusion

To conclude, the analysis presented in this thesis points to a potentially rich field of research and debate which can help develop a better understanding of the dynamics of online journalistic practice as well as the diversity in global communication research. Within both Chinese and Western contexts, this research re-examined aspects that have been widely discussed in the previous literature and empirical studies of web journalism (specifically multimediality, interactivity, and hypertextuality), as well as a more overlooked aspect (textual news online). Much evidence in this comparative study suggests that the Chinese version of the mainstream web news genre differs significantly from the Western version. Different journalistic values, as summarized below, have dominated online journalistic practice in the two different cultural contexts. One implication of this finding is that scholars should be cautious of regarding the politically-charged model as the only or the preferable perspective to take in investigating the web-based media in China. This research project shows that a wide range of contributing factors, namely the highly competitive online market, social and cultural conventions, the hierarchical media system, and the unique profile of internet users in the country, have shaped the distinctive features of Chinese mainstream web journalism. An approach that considers China's distinctiveness solely in political terms disarms researchers from noticing both the presence of censorship elsewhere and other crucial aspects of the web news genre in China.

### **Gatewatching or gateopening vs. gatekeeping,**

The analysis in the previous chapters has evidently shown the different journalistic values within Chinese and Western online journalistic practices. One significantly important dimension here is the role played by “gatekeepers”. Mainstream web journalism in the West has largely followed its traditional principle of strict gatekeeping, whereas mainstream web journalism in China has followed a trend of “gatewatching” (Bruns, 2003, 2005) or “gateopening” (Boczkowski, 2000) to some extent. For quite a long time, gatekeeping has been a dominant paradigm for traditional journalistic news collecting and publishing as well as for academic work on the mediating process (cf. White, 1950). To perform their gatekeeping role well, mainstream journalists have tended to attach great importance to objectivity as a core professional value. Friedman observes that “objectivity insists that facts can be separated from values, and that the proper role of the media is to sort, verify, and deliver those “unbiased” facts to readers” (1998: 326). In journalism’s professional ideology, news content is contextualized in media frames constructed through “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion” (Gitlin, 1980: 7). In this regard, Western online journalists have played a similar “gatekeeper” role as their offline colleagues. There is much evidence in my analysis suggesting Western online journalists’ pursuit of selection, editorial expertise, and elite content. Mainstream news websites in the West usually offered limited but relatively long pieces of news, representing a “thematic news frame” (Iyengar, 1991) that synthesizes various events and background information in a single piece of news. By employing a selection of “authoritative sources”,<sup>200</sup> journalists are thus offered “a safeguard for their own professional reputations and their notions of objectivity” (Ruggiero, 2004: 95). More specifically, findings drawn from Western websites under study are in line with Goode’s contention that the gatekeeping process is retained in the online news environment, “because visibility

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<sup>200</sup> According to Robert Sahr (1993), source authority includes at least three types: holders or candidates for formal government positions; interest group or company representatives; “experts” in a topic being given news coverage.

and attention, if not information, remain scarce resources in the online news sphere: whether or not a particular story reaches the front page of a popular online news site or remains buried several pages deep has consequences akin to “traditional” gatekeeping processes” (2009: 1295).

Opposing gatekeeping, Bruns (2003, 2005) proposes gatewatching as a paradigm for the online journalistic environment and there is much evidence from Chinese websites supporting such a notion. Bruns argues that the limitations (both technical and commercial) of traditional news media require journalists and editors to combine their reports of various news sources into a single news story, but the online environment, in which “space is anything but scarce”, offers “no immediate reason to stringently police the gates of online news publishing” (2003: 34). In fact, the web possesses a tendency to “attract niche communities” (Bruns, 2003: 34). Evidence from Chinese websites echoes such a fashion. For example, the Olympic case study reveals that photos of almost every nation’s parade at the opening ceremony were included in the Chinese news section; the pandemic case study found that news websites offered mini-games for kids to know about swine flu and dodge about the “virus attack”. This is in line with Bruns’ claim that “minor issues of limited audience interest” are presented “just as well as main news stories” (2003: 34).

Moreover, Bruns’ assumption that the hyperlinked nature of the web would facilitate journalists’ gatewatcher position is also evident from my analysis of Chinese news online. The roles of gatekeeper-journalist and specialist librarian come together in the roles of the gatewatchers of online news (Bruns, 2003). Bruns compares the online news gatherer to a “librarian” who “constantly surveys what information becomes available in a variety of media and serves as a guide to the most relevant sources when approached by information-seekers” (2003: 35). The “librarian” position, Bruns argues, contrasts dramatically with that of the traditional ideal of the “gatekeeper-journalist”, as “they support the case of seeking information rather than that of the information providers or controllers” (2003: 35). Via hyperlinks and

hypertexts, it becomes possible for journalists, or to borrow Bruns' term, "internet librarians", to refer users to sources, contexts and background information. Thus, it reduces the need for journalists to "amalgamate and summarize all available information in their own reports"; instead, the report may only "consist of an introductory report with further links to more detailed information" (Bruns, 2003: 34). The Chinese journalistic practice online seems to closely follow such a logic. For both the Olympic Games and influenza cases, numerous chunky news stories constructed within an episodic news frame that focuses on a single dimension of the event were wrapped within the in-depth news section. Chinese news websites, especially the web portals, usually composed short introductory reports by themselves, and offered plenty of shovelware from a wide range of sources. The use of detailed categories in a hierarchical structure to compose various subsections, and the employment of hundreds of news pieces, news pictures and video items suggest an online journalistic value of more choices, less editorial control and thus a relatively weak "gatekeeping". An important dimension that deserves attention here is the impact of commercial considerations on gatewatching. Instead of frequently pointing users to sources via external links, in practice, news websites in China are more likely to cite, display, and hyperlink almost everything within their own domains in the fear of losing users to rival sites. In addition, quite a few hyperlinks beside news stories are more driven by a promotion logic and often have little relevance to the main story. A form of "commercial gatekeeping" (Hargittai, 2004) is prominent at Chinese mainstream news websites in which external hyperlinks are strategically employed and advertisements and sponsors' links are frequently shown. Hence, an ideal gatewatching process that guides users to the most relevant sources via various hyperlinks, as Bruns (2003) expected, seems far from fulfilled. As such, Goode calls attention to "*new modes of gatekeeping power*" that are influenced by "venture capital, large scale corporations, advertising revenue and commercialism" (2009: 1295).

Largely driven by the different journalistic values (gatewatching or gateopening vs. gatekeeping) listed above, the communicating "artefacts or devices" (Lievrouw and

Livingstone, 2002) have been applied differently. In terms of the use of news images, the Chinese web news genre emphasizes images as an “impetus for compelling public attention” (Zelizer, 2005), while the Western web news genre employs images as “mirrors of the events” to reflect the world at large (Zelizer, 2005: 28). In terms of the deployment of news stories, the Chinese web news genre pays attention to immediacy and overall comprehensiveness, while its Western counterpart values elite content and tends to have “a deliberate ‘reduction’” of news pieces (Quandt, 2008). With regard to the adoption of podcasts, Chinese podcasts are more often employed to involve amateurs’ contributions, while Western podcasts are more often created by professionals and are accompanied by an active invitation to subscribe to automatic downloads to portable devices.

### **Commercialization vs. conservativeness**

Furthermore, both case studies indicate that Chinese news websites have given high priority to “immediacy” and “timely updates”, whereas their Western counterparts seem to be slow in embracing the internet’s “timeliness” attribute. The high number of news stories on the Chinese websites is closely related to the pursuit of immediacy as well as a journalistic practice that never replaces older stories, but rather accumulates them. Largely owing to the intensively competitive online environment, Chinese websites compete strongly in being the first to issue breaking news, be it one sentence or one paragraph, and be it the gold medal news or the latest statistical report on swine flu. In contrast, mainstream news websites in the West are less active in pursuing timeliness. The most prominent example in this aspect is the NYT. In line with its newspaper tradition, the NYT only denotes publishing dates and has no time stamp at all. The other Western websites under analysis, although they have time stamps, did not update their news as often as Chinese websites. It seems that the traditional gatekeeping role has hindered journalists online from reacting quickly and publishing news immediately, as the gatekeeping process takes time (Bruns, 2003). The quest for absolute immediacy is, it seems, incompatible with conventional news routines (Matheson and Allan, 2007).

In fact, much of the analysis reveals an entrepreneurial and freedom-oriented explosion of material at Chinese websites, in which the values of edited, organized, professional and summarized news are much less prominent. News reports online, especially web-generated content, are characterized by informality, subjectivity, and eyewitness experience. Online reporters are usually personally involved and are not primarily committed to objective and impartial reports. Examples of this trend abound in analysis above. The Olympic-related “unprofessional” interviews and talk-shows as well as online editors’ personal accounts of quarantine or infection experience during the break of swine flu have confirmed the popularity of “raw” (or less edited) material and a less formal manner at Chinese mainstream news online. Such a fashion is attractive in that “it offered to take the reader further than the formal news text into the journalist’s experience of the news, giving them a dynamic look at the story behind the story of covering the news” (Matheson and Allan, 2007: 5). Such a perspective aims to present “a particular kind of veracity” by closing “the gap between the event and the telling of it”, and “seeking to convince the news audience” with their own experience (Matheson and Allan, 2007: 7). Within Western mainstream news websites, such a fashion is mostly seen in journalists’ blogs, whereas Chinese news websites seem to be particularly interested in adopting the fashion of informality in news reports and feature stories. Executives of mainstream news websites see such a freedom-oriented journalistic trend as a decisive edge in the competition for online traffic. As shown in the Olympic case, the CEO of Sohu is proud of the site’s online talk shows that are characterized by casual chats, sharp questions, and less edited content. Even the “most serious” Xinhuanet also presented informal interviews that were conducted by online journalists.

One more aspect that is crucial to the discussion of the gatewatching trend is the adoption of user generated content (UGC) by mainstream news websites. Boczkowski (2000) coined the term “gateopening” to capture such a modified editorial function that includes work processes centred upon the facilitation of content creation. This



study finds that mainstream news websites in China have shown a gateopening logic to a certain extent by encouraging users' contributions, participation and further involvement, whereas their Western counterparts tend to emphasize the editorial expertise that strengthens the professional authority in the online news field. Examples of this trend abound. Within the Chinese websites under analysis, there were wider varieties of commenting means (e.g. general discussion forums, specific discussion forums along with news stories, chatrooms), greater adoption of users' contributions (e.g. netizens' blogs, users' posts, amateurs' podcasts), and more choices of playful attributes that enticed users' participation (e.g. virtual torch relay, themed mini-games, online contests, offline activities). It seems that Chinese mainstream news websites have embraced the Web 2.0 era to a great extent. The "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly, 2005) that promotes internet users to add value is quite prominent within mainstream Chinese news practice. In contrast, there is a general absence of users' blogs and discussion forums for specific news items within Western websites studied here. Journalists' blogs dominate the field of blogging. Western journalists online rarely employed any netizens' contributions to complement their news coverage. Playful attributes that encourage users' interaction with content were sparse at Western sites. If we summarize the Chinese online journalistic practice as carrying an intention of increasing intimacy to attract online traffic, the Western practice, on the contrary, might be seen as having deliberately created a distance from the internet users to safeguard its "authority".

Generally speaking, my analysis reveals that Western mainstream journalism online is conservative in embracing the internet's unique attributes to empower users. In fact, quite a few previous empirical studies (e.g. Schultz, 1999; Kenney et al., 2000; Spyridou and Veglis, 2003; Rosenberry, 2005), as mentioned in the literature review, precede this study in pointing out the reluctance or conservativeness of Western mainstream news media to both facilitate and react to user generated content. As to why this might be the case, previous research mainly emphasizes various dimensions of newsroom organization and practice. After interviewing newsroom staff, Paulussen

and Ugille attribute the sluggish development of participatory journalism in online newspapers to “newsroom structures, work routines and professional beliefs rather than unwillingness among professionals to open up the news production process to user contributions” (2008: 24). Through in-depth interviews with editors from established online news media in the UK, Thurman (2008) presents a detailed and illuminating report of the conflicts between the journalistic professionals’ gatekeeping roles and their perceptions of user participation. In addition, Thurman (2008) shows how legal, technical, commercial and personnel considerations impact on the adoption of user generated content in online newsrooms.

### **Broader contextual factors**

Instead of further accounting for the conservativeness of Western online media, this study attempts to explore broader contextual factors contributing to the gateopening or gatewatching trend among Chinese web-based media. The major findings of this study support Huang’s (2007) “negotiation model” that four powers, that is, the state, the media, the market and the society, are shaping the development of Chinese media through a negotiated process. The summary above confirms the assumption that the applicability of communicating devices and practices are shaped by “the social arrangements and organizations that form around” them (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002: 7). More importantly, genre analysis in this thesis helps to sensitize the negotiation of various contextual factors that shape the development of Chinese and Western web news genres. The commercial, social-cultural and political contexts in China have significantly influenced the Chinese web news genre developing in a different way from the Western web news genre.

Both case studies suggest that media commercialization and the highly competitive atmosphere in the Chinese online market are main contributing factors influencing the distinctive characteristics of Chinese mainstream web journalism. As introduced earlier, the Chinese internet market has a much more intense competition in terms of mainstream news provision. Besides the online counterparts of traditional media

organizations, at least four web portals are also active competitors at a national level in the online news market. The intensely competitive atmosphere and the pursuit of profits are likely to give rise to a distinctive landscape in Chinese journalism online. Every phase of analysis has shown features influenced by commercial concerns. In terms of multimedia utilization, Chinese mainstream news websites have made heavy use of graphics and video streams, mainly with the purpose of drawing viewers' attention. The multimedia news content that comprises entertainment and journalism, emotion and information assists in reaching as large an audience as possible. In this sense, the employment of multimedia contents is largely driven by a storytelling approach aiming at making the text appealing (Väliaho and Lundgren, 2005). Such a practice is a response to the concern that the audience, especially the younger generation, is bored of long texts and longs for more visual news (Stovall, 2004). In addition, the steep rise of original video content in the Olympic case, especially the growth of champion interviews and celebrity talk show content, together with the decline of web-generated video content for swine flu case, suggests a strong story-telling approach and thus an overwhelming market-orientation of Chinese web-based media. When market demand for such features is perceived, they become plentiful. In the aspect of employing interactive features, mainstream news websites in China have paid particular attention to active and highly active interactivity that facilitates human interaction. By offering blog platforms for ordinary internet users, emphasizing netizens' contributions to podcasts, providing mini-games and other curiosity-arousal devices, organizing chat rooms and even offline activities, Chinese mainstream news websites are competing in brand-building and the pursuit of "user-stickiness". With regard to the use of hyperlinks and hypertexts, a promotion tactic dominates Chinese online journalistic practice. Driven by commercial pressure, Chinese news websites have made heavy use of internal links to sustain viewers' interest and to keep users clicking around. The hyperlink in most cases plays less the role of adding context or drilling down into the story, but more one of news-promotion, which contrasts with academics' expectation of "completeness and context" through hyperlinking (e.g. Kawamoto, 1998; Deuze, 1999; Pavlik, 2001).

Within Chinese news websites, context and completeness are mainly pursued through detailed hierarchies of elements, in which minor sections or subsections display much background information and contextual or introductory material around certain topics. Moreover, news websites in China are by and large cautious in employing external hyperlinks that may risk guiding viewers to their rivals; most employ hyperlinks strategically to keep viewers surfing within the site. As to the textual news, the profit drive has contributed to the dominance of episodic news frame constituted out of sensational and emotional appeals. The busy layout of Chinese news websites and the provision of short and chunky news pieces epitomize the episodic approach to news.

Social and cultural factors are highly important as well, however, in shaping the distinctiveness of Chinese web journalism. The different cultural values between China and the West have contributed to a number of differences in journalistic practice online. The foundation of Chinese culture is Confucianism that prioritizes collectivism, in contrast to Western individualism (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). Driven by this set of cultural values, Chinese websites usually indicate news sources collectively, for example, sourcing items as from Xinhua news or CCTV news, while Western websites usually highlight the effort of individual reporters or photographers. More importantly, the different utilization of interactive features can be largely explained in terms of the different cultural models. According to Hall, people in collectivistic culture (e.g. China, Korea) are more likely than those in noncollectivistic culture (e.g. Anglo-American countries) to pay attention to the importance of personal relationships and to build and maintain those relationships between and among members. Thus, in addition to the profit-driven factor, culture is also an important impetus for Chinese news websites incorporating a handful of networking features, such as platforms for users to post blogs, podcasts, discussion and comments. Cultural difference helps to, at least, partly explain my findings that Chinese news websites employ more active and highly active interactivity features to facilitate human interactions.

The unique demographic structure of Chinese internet users also greatly influences the development of web journalism. Websites employ a handful of playful attributes as well as heavy graphic and entertainment-focused information to appeal to the young, since netizens aged 10-20 form the largest user group in China.<sup>201</sup> Moreover, acknowledging the effort of typing Chinese characters<sup>202</sup> and the significant number of novice users,<sup>203</sup> news websites have displayed a number of devices aimed at easing much user effort. The effort-saving approach, such as search engines accompanied with frequently searched words, comment boxes accompanied with input beforehand and various simple votes, is an important tactic to attract and maintain the interests of the novice and senior users.

My findings give some support to the politically-focused tradition of analysis, but only some. The state clearly still plays an important role in the online journalistic field in China. As exemplified in the Olympic case, certain “controversial” news topics are reported in a less balanced way in China than in the West. Despite public criticism (as evident in discussion forums and news comments), the news coverage of the Olympic theme song “You and Me” was overwhelmingly positive in tone; despite the growing attention to Chinese gymnasts’ age in Western media, there was a sole source in Chinese mainstream media online covering this issue, reporting that Chinese gymnasts’ age completely complied with Olympic requirements. Such examples suggest that web media in China are under censorship in relation to certain issues. Chinese mainstream websites are reluctant to include contrary voices in “sensitive” news stories. Nevertheless, discussion forums and online comments are relatively open for these issues and will be analyzed below. A serious constraint on Chinese web-based media is the restricted journalistic registration and the limited

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<sup>201</sup> According to the CNNIC report (January 2009; January 2010), netizens aged 10-19 was the largest user group (35.2% as of 2008; 31.8% as of 2009) and netizens aged 20-29 was the second largest user group (31.5% as of 2008; 28.6% as of 2009).

<sup>202</sup> Typing Chinese characters on the computer requires more effort than typing English. In order to type Chinese, one need to install an input device and to acquire proper input methods (e.g. by pronunciation or structure of the characters).

<sup>203</sup> The total number of Chinese netizens is only 8.9 million at the end of 1999. In ten years time, the number grows to 384 million, with the latest annual growth rate of 28.9%. The rapid growth rate implies a reality that a significant number of Chinese netizens are indeed novice users who might feel more comfortable with the help of effort-saving devices.

apportionment of interview licences for journalists working online. The growth of original news content (hard news in particular) on Chinese mainstream news websites is more likely to depend on Chinese media policies (e.g. interview or reporting rights that are granted to news websites for certain events), and less likely to solely rely on the sites' own efforts (e.g. newsroom structures, work routines and professional beliefs). For the festive Olympics, there was a temporary increase of web-generated news content, but for the highly “sensitive”<sup>204</sup> pandemic case, there was very limited web-created news. By and large, shovelware and repurposed news still dominate Chinese mainstream news online. In terms of the originality of journalism on the web, the factors most widely cited as important in Western newsrooms, such as economic, journalistic and audience-related issues (e.g. Boczkowski, 2004; Domingo 2006; Berman et al., 2007; Thurman and Lupton, 2008; Paterson and Domingo, 2008), are important but less crucial in the Chinese context when compared with government intervention.

### **Public sphere and social space**

Despite censorship over the reporting of certain issues and restricted journalistic registration, both case studies generally reveal the internet's rising role of facilitating the public sphere in China. As mentioned earlier, Chinese mainstream websites have devoted much effort to the convenience of user commenting and discussion. The analysis of the Chinese online forum in these two cases shows a high degree of openness and diversity in terms of content, and emphasizes attractiveness in terms of forms and presentation. Groups or issues that are rarely covered in the traditional media, such as marginalized people, the pros and cons of the current sports system (as shown in the Olympic case), and the lessons learned from SARS, the problems of current medical system (as shown in swine flu case), have been foregrounded and given much space in the parts of Chinese cyberspace managed by mainstream media organizations. More importantly, the popular grassroots discussion online has

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<sup>204</sup> As mentioned above, a legacy of the SARS epidemic was a cautiousness and high degree of sensitivity in the Chinese state towards epidemics and pandemics.

occasionally fed news reporting. These findings suggest that mainstream news media online has become an empowering instrument for strengthening the Chinese public sphere on at least three interconnected levels. Firstly, the online media offer a public platform that did not exist before for generating vigorous discussion. The internet-based platform of communication by and large enables people from all walks of life and all over the world to express their views and to exchange opinions. According to Habermas (1989), public opinion plays an important role in a viable and healthy public sphere where public opinion is formed and articulated, though the specific nature of public opinion varies at different times. Secondly, the scope of public communication has been expanded by its speed and reach, as revealed by the rising number of user comments. The gatewatching and gateopening trends that are characterized by the model of “many producers and massive receivers” (Morris and Ogan, 1996) benefits broader public communication. Thirdly, the online forum offers a viable and alternative channel of information. Compared with the traditional media, the relatively unlimited capacity of the internet enables much more diversified information. Thus it may break the information monopoly and provide alternative routes of information dissemination. The findings here have partly supported the claim that the internet has created a communication environment in China where “multiple sources of information” have replaced the “single-source news” age of pre-internet days (Li, 2001). The multiplication of competing sources of information is particularly evident through the adoption of users’ contributions via Web 2.0 features, as shown from the analysis above.

One more implication that deserves attention is the social space provided by mainstream news websites in China. A major element of my findings lends credence to the assumption that “although the Internet serves for most of its users and on many occasions as a venue for information, much of its transformative power lies in its ability to act as a social space where people gather, interact, gossip, banter, play games, and do many more things that groups do” (Tai, 2006: 165). Instead of guiding users to other social networking websites, Chinese news websites are actively offering

platforms for social networking. Robb et al.'s description of the "combination of rich content, active intelligence, [and] collaborative communications to create a compelling consumer experience" (1997: 5) is evident in the context of Chinese news websites. Thus, the finding of this study does not support the kind of politically charged analysis that dominates the global media scholarship on Chinese internet media. In the eyes of the mass audience in China, the adoption of the web-based media is a part of a wider media transformation and indeed it may simply mean "a more accessible, participative and enjoyable media experience in a competitive and diverse media communication market, and not necessarily linked to an ultimate political-ideological end meaning" (Huang, 2007: 404). My analysis suggests an increasing role for the internet as an important communication and socialization tool in China. The web-based media has become an amalgamation of various identities, providing news, information, entertainment, social networks and public services.

### **De-Westernizing approach**

In a broader sense, this thesis contributes to the de-Westernizing analysis that is currently underdeveloped in global communication studies. In the work, *Alternative discourses in Asian social science*, Alatas points out that the contributions of non-Western scholars have remained "on the margins of global social science" (2006: 105). Recently, Gunaratne (2010) added that "the situation is more glaring in the relatively new social science traditions of communication" (2010: 474). Scholars note that there is an increasing discontent with communication theories and studies being "Westerncentric" and they call attention to decentralization, de-Westernization, and differentiation in communication study (Ma, 2000; Curran and Park, 2000; Alatas, 2006; Wang, 2010). My research project here seems to reflect this trend. Plenty of evidence in this study suggests that the categories and findings of Western online journalism research must be systematically re-examined in order to study the Chinese case. For example, the prevailing Western literature indicates that the multimedia content would promote a "smooth navigation" and avoid audiences getting lost in the sea of information (Bardoel, 1996). However, this assumption seems difficult to tally



with the Chinese reality and there is an emphasis at Chinese websites on making the “sea” bigger by a heavy use of multimedia content. Also, Zelizer’s (2005) argument that images act as mirrors of events or as a reflection of the world at large is not the case often in the Chinese context, where the images stand alone and can be regarded as part of the play of the sites. Moreover, there is much that is rarely found in the West: the Chinese online journalists’ practice that significantly eases users’ effort, highlights an Apple-style slide show, appropriates relatively “raw material” or “unedited content”, excludes contrary voices in “sensitive” news stories, incorporates traditional cultural elements (e.g. *Shiji*, *Yijing*, scroll, Beijing Opera mask), and emphasizes amateurs’ contributions to podcasts rather than the convenience of podcast for consuming professional media. All of these findings point to a different version of the web news genre, which is dominated by the portal logic of attracting audiences, and where discussion is a significant component, as opposed to the professionally dominated, highly edited content of the Western news website.

Together, these distinctive features of Chinese web journalism support greater assertiveness and determination in the sheer necessity of developing theoretical frameworks and paradigms that take consideration of the cultural context. This study indeed echoes Gunaratne’s description of the constructive nature of de-Westernizing communication research. He suggests that a productive research project of this kind “does not mean the elimination of the corpus of work” that has been produced by both Western and non-Western scholars; rather, it means “the addition of multiple approaches to investigate problems in their proper context, so that factors such as culture, environment, ideology and power are not omitted from the theoretical framework or held to be constant” (2010: 474). In this study, both Eastern and Western theories, or hybrids thereof, coexisted. Both the research methods and the detailed categories for analysis have been carefully selected to be more sympathetic to the cultural specifics than to the idea of content. More precisely, in terms of methodology, this thesis is distinctive in attempting to study features of Chinese mainstream journalism online via comparative case studies across four countries using

genre theory. How the mainstream web news genre defines, organizes and finally communicates with various social realities is evidently shown with the help of genre analysis. Both the Olympic and the swine flu cases suggest significant differences between Chinese and Western versions of the web news genre. The festive Olympic Games, as a high-profile case, has shown perhaps the most dramatic journalistic practice online, whereas the relatively low-profile yet sensitive pandemic helps to point towards more generalizable conclusions. Moreover, abandoning the widely employed analysis of front pages of online newspapers, this study focuses on in-depth sections of mainstream news websites that comprise television stations' online outlets and web portals' news pages. Such an alternative approach gives insight into the fundamentals of journalistic practice and provides the instrumental benefit in capturing the distinctiveness of different forms of mainstream web news genre. In terms of detailed analytical groups, my chosen categories allow me to move beyond the Western assumptions of research on Chinese journalism and to obtain the differences in different cultural contexts. Hong et al.'s (2008) model of active and inactive interactivity together with Heeter's detailed construct of interactivity and Ha and James' additional dimension of "playfulness" were employed to examine the interactivity of news websites. Zerba's (2004) "multimedia news packages" and Mitra and Cohen's (1999) "self conscious hypertextuality" and "seamless intertextuality" were adopted to respectively investigate the multimodality and hypertextuality of news websites. Rivenburgh's (2004) summaries of variations found in Olympic news coverage and Dudo et al.'s (2007) five-dimensional framework of risk-related news coverage were used to investigate the textual news in the Olympic and swine flu cases in turn. Huang's (2007) paradigm of "from control to negotiation" and Hu's (2007) three-feature paradigm that depicts the contradictory role of Chinese media are helpful in understanding the nature of Chinese media in general. In short, a network of worldwide analytical theories and frameworks was selected and assembled to better serve the main interest of this research project.

## **Final comments**

All in all, the distinctiveness of Chinese web journalism is clearly evident from the comparative analysis between Chinese and Western mainstream news websites. Much evidence in this study suggests that Chinese web journalism is a different form of the web news genre. National-specific features are prominent in the Chinese news websites under study. Nevertheless, it should be clarified that the mainstream journalism in Chinese cyberspace does not emerge as a unique web news genre that completely differs from the Western one, as the overall components do resemble each other in many ways. Multimedia content, interactive features, hypertexts and hyperlinks, as well as textual news reports constitute both Chinese and Western mainstream web journalism genres. Especially in the technological dimension, Chinese news websites follow the Western model to a great extent, as the technological innovations of ICTs have been overwhelmingly pioneered by the West. Web 2.0 features, in particular, were firstly seen and adopted in the West and then appeared in China. Further applications of various technological innovations, however, are different in Chinese and Western news websites, as exemplified in terms of blogs, podcasts, and the Twitter service.

Moreover, this thesis argues that journalists' practice is strongly context dependent. Distinctive economic, social-cultural, political and organizational factors contribute to shaping Chinese web journalism in a way that contradicts the notion of a homogeneous worldwide journalism or of a single set of norms for journalism. In particular, both case studies suggest that media commercialization together with the highly competitive atmosphere in the Chinese online market form the most significant factor contributing to the distinctive characteristics of Chinese mainstream web journalism. Every phase of analysis in this research project has shown features shaped by commercial concerns. It can be argued that the marketization and globalization of the Chinese economy in general and media commercialization in particular are the strongest influencing forces in the development of Chinese journalism online. This implication indeed fits within Huang's "negotiation" paradigm of media—market—society—state, in which the media sector has been progressively

incorporated into the wider “socialist market economy”, and “state control of the media without negotiating with other players in the marketplace and society seems to have become increasingly difficult, if not logically impossible” (2007: 406). In addition, this study reveals the very existence of influencing factors that are usually neglected in scholarly discussion, such as organizational structures, social-cultural conventions and the unique profile of internet users.

In conclusion, I propose the study of distinctive features of online journalism worldwide offers benefits in understanding the diversity of the world’s media system. To that end, in future research, it would be valuable to examine more cases so as to test out the generalizations proposed in this study. An even wider choice of web-based media would be helpful to extend the validity of the overall finding, as well as investigation of mainstream news websites in other countries. Additionally, there would be value in conducting a comparative study of Chinese and Western audience’s perceptions of the web news genre. Research of this kind would assist in more fully comprehending the impact of different news genres and illuminating future trends in the field of web journalism. Moreover, Gunaratne suggests that “Asian scholars could make a significant contribution to universalizing communication/social science by explicating complexity science in relation to the insights embedded in Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Hinduism, among others” (2010: 474-5). By adopting models or unifying epistemologies derived from Asian philosophies, such as the Chinese *Yijing* (Book of Changes), Asian researchers are encouraged to rid themselves of the uncritical adoption or imitation of Western communication models and construct “the reductionist theoretical framework” for empirical studies within their own cultural contexts (Gunaratne, 2010: 475). Such alternative discourses and approaches would contribute to the relatively underdeveloped studies on indigenization, declonization and globalization of worldwide communication.

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