

# **Protocols of Control in Chinese Online News Media:**

## **The Case of Wenzhou News**



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# Abstract

This thesis explores censorship and self-censorship in online news production in China. It presents an analysis drawn from observation in the online newsroom and interviews with online news workers and cyber police officers in China. In addition, it studies the mechanisms of online censorship and protocols of news censorship in an online newsroom context. This involves an analysis of journalistic activities in the process of online news production, self-censorship of online news workers, and power flows between the Chinese authorities and online news media in determining the output of online news content.

Although the Chinese “free press” is enshrined in the Constitution of The People’s Republic of China as a right, the mechanism of online news censorship is shaped under the influence of an anti-liberal theory of limited freedom of speech. Confucius, the proclaimer of this theory, devalues individual liberty, advocating the ‘*right to speak*’ is a benefaction of the ruling class, and this “freedom” can be compromised for the welfare of the state. It is a view shared by Confucius’ successors. This theory, therefore, conceptually sets up a distinctive paternalistic protocol of online news censorship in China, as the online news workers are instructed to censor and self-censor online content under the influence of administrative interference.

Through thematic analysis of field notes, which covers a four-week period of observation and recording in the online newsroom of *Wenzhou News*, a local online news organisation in China, the hierarchical structure and general workflow in this online newsroom are

illustrated. By further analysing interviews conducted with online journalists, editors, web administrators and cyber police officers, this thesis draws on the perspectives of online news workers and censors towards the protocol of online news censorship, through which the power matrix between the Chinese government, the Communist Party of China, and online news media are triangulated.

By analysing and constructing technological and social modes of censorship in the online environment, this thesis sets up a conceptual framework of the protocols of online news censorship in China, draws detailed processes of online news production under the pressure of censorship, and explores the concept of “harmonisation” within the online newsroom where specific ideological motivations and structural operationalisation influence the output of online news content.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Objectives and research questions

The aim of this research is to explore and critically discuss issues of censorship and self-censorship in China's online news industry. Its central focus is on the online news production processes and mechanisms of censorship that are applied by the Chinese online news workers and cyber police, or 'cybercops' (Tang, 2005), a police force that specialises in monitoring and censoring online content in China (Fries, 2000; Liang & Lu, 2010; Tang, 2005). In order to study censorship and self-censorship activities in China's online news, further context is required. This thesis will examine the environment of online news censorship in the newsroom of the *Wenzhou News*, a local online news media organisation in China. It will do so in order to examine broader questions of freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the People's Republic from the perspective of the online news workers who work in the online newsroom environment. The research will answer research questions as follows: 1) What are the mechanisms of online censorship used by the Chinese authorities? 2) How are these mechanisms or protocols operationalised? 3) How do online news workers experience and perceive censorship? 4) How does this impact on their journalistic work? These questions are further explored in Chapter 5 to Chapter 7 and will be expanded as follows:

Firstly, an investigation into the cyber police was carried out with the aim to answer a number of sub-questions: Who are the censors and the cyber police? What are the roles and responsibilities of these cyber police officers? How do these censors monitor and

filter online content? Finally, how do they enforce censorship and exert pressure upon online news? To answer these sub-questions, the thesis will define the cyber police's functions and their institutional role in censorship of the Internet in China, the systematic protocols of censorship for the online news media, and provide an account of the strategies that the cyber police use in filtering and censoring online news content.

Secondly, the focus is on investigating the protocols of censorship in online news media in China from the perspective of news workers. By observing journalists and online news production in the newsroom of the local online news media organisation *Wenzhou News*, and interviewing Chinese online news workers, the research clarifies and answers sub-questions as follows: What are the hierarchical structures and power flows in an online newsroom in China? How does this influence the protocols of online censorship? To what extent does the power flow between the online news media and the Chinese authorities determine the output of online content? To answer these questions, this research will provide a representation of the hierarchical structure of the online news operation and how it influences the autonomy of online news workers in the processes of online news production. Furthermore, it will identify the roles and responsibilities of online journalists, editors and web administrators in terms of responding to pressure of censorship.

Lastly, by defining and highlighting censorship protocols enforced during the attempted reporting of "critical" news, this thesis presents an account of how censorship is manifest across different levels and layers of online news production processes. Drawing from empirical data of interviews with online news workers, the triangular models of restriction and coordination will be developed and detailed. This model will demonstrate how online news media, cyber police and the publicity department restrain but coordinate in the processes of online news production and influence the output of online news content.

## **1.2 Research Questions in focus**

### **1.2.1 The hierarchy of online news media**

The hierarchical structure of online news media is illustrated, and the different professional roles in the newsroom, including online journalists, editors and chief editors, photographers, correspondents, supervisors, and directors are identified. The reason for having a framework of hierarchy and corresponding position for each professional role is that the hierarchy defines the autonomy that these roles have in the online newsroom. Here, the term ‘autonomy’ specifically refers to the extent to which an individual news worker can influence the decision-making processes regarding online news content. In practice, high-positioned roles possess more autonomy in the newsroom than lower ones, and therefore they have more influence in making decisions on online news content. In relation to analysing the protocol of online news censorship, this hierarchy is a significant factor as it determines the process of online news production: who instructs whom? Who makes the final decision on a news story? What is included or excluded before a story goes to the public? This hierarchy is significant and distinctive in the context of online news media in China because it ensures that the construction of online news media is controlled by the authorities, and therefore the output of online news content can be monitored and censored via mechanisms of Internet censorship.

### **1.2.2 The Commentary function of online news workers**

This research also explores and discusses the commentary roles that online news workers have in the newsroom. Besides their journalistic practice, such as news information gathering, interviewing, recording and editing, online news workers also act as user-generated content monitors and public opinion orientaters. The obligation of monitors requires online news workers to monitor and filter the user-generated content on their

website, and delete the content they judge as ‘inappropriate’. The scope of inappropriate comments is vague and depends on the judgment of individual news workers engaged in the role. Based on their journalistic experience, online journalists and editors appear to have a preconception of what constitutes being ‘inappropriate’, and they are constantly reminded and supervised by their superiors in the newsroom on specific issues and events. For example, online journalists and editors understand that anti-Socialist content is politically sensitive, and obscene images and hate speech also need to be detected and deleted. But they would be reminded by their chief editors and supervisors in times of highly politically sensitive events that specific names or locations that are related to the events would demand heightened monitoring and attention. Content that identified these names and locations would need to be noted, filtered and examined more carefully. The obligation of ‘public opinion orientaters’ refers to what I call ‘pseudo commentators’; that is, online journalists and editors use common user accounts, pretend to be public users, and post online content on their own news story pages. In doing so, they hope to shape and synchronise the atmosphere of public discussions and therefore, in their own words, orientate public opinion.

### **1.2.3 The role of the supervisor of online news production**

This study also clarifies the nature of the supervisor role in the online news environment, as the existence of a supervisor is seen as a significant method for the Party’s infiltration of the online news media in China. The Communist Party has an undeniable influence over the online news media and supervisors are ranked higher than the editors and online journalists, therefore they possess substantial power in the newsroom. Supervisors are required to be in charge of ideology control and to implement administrative instructions. All supervisors are members of either the Party or the Youth League, and the personal files (*Dang-An*) of online news workers, which are classified as confidential, are kept and

stored by supervisors. The supervisory role is also seen as a symbol of control of China's online news. Due to the existence of such supervisors, there is a process of administrative self-censorship in the online newsroom. The news content that is produced by online journalists and edited by news editors has to go through this process because ultimately the primary targeted readership is not the public, but the authorities.

#### **1.2.4 Triangular model of online news censorship**

This research pays close attention to the protocols of how the online news is produced and how the different kinds of online news workers function in the online newsroom. By observing and recording these activities, and interviewing online news workers, this research develops a triangular model of online news censorship which consist of two matrices of coordination and restriction. In the triangular model, which is going to be elaborated upon in *Chapter 7:4*, three forces are involved in the power flow: online news media, the Party, and the government.

The triangular model of coordination and restriction is a key finding of this research, as it illustrates the power flow and dynamics between the forces that actors possess, which have a significant influence in determining the content of news stories. The influence on public opinion is a significant reason for online news media gaining its influence over the public in the process of online news production, and the chance to triangulate in relation to the Party and the government. Thus, the triangular model explains not only how and where the external pressure of censorship comes from but also how online news media process the pressure and counteract external interference from the authorities.

### 1.2.5 Protocols of online news censorship

This research develops a model of online censorship in China and details how it functions. It includes different levels of online censorship from technological means (such as the Great Firewall and pre-installed software in personal computers), a government-based public security system (such as cyber police), to different censorship layers within the process of news production and journalists' self-censorship at the stage of conceiving and writing the news stories, as Figure 1 demonstrates.

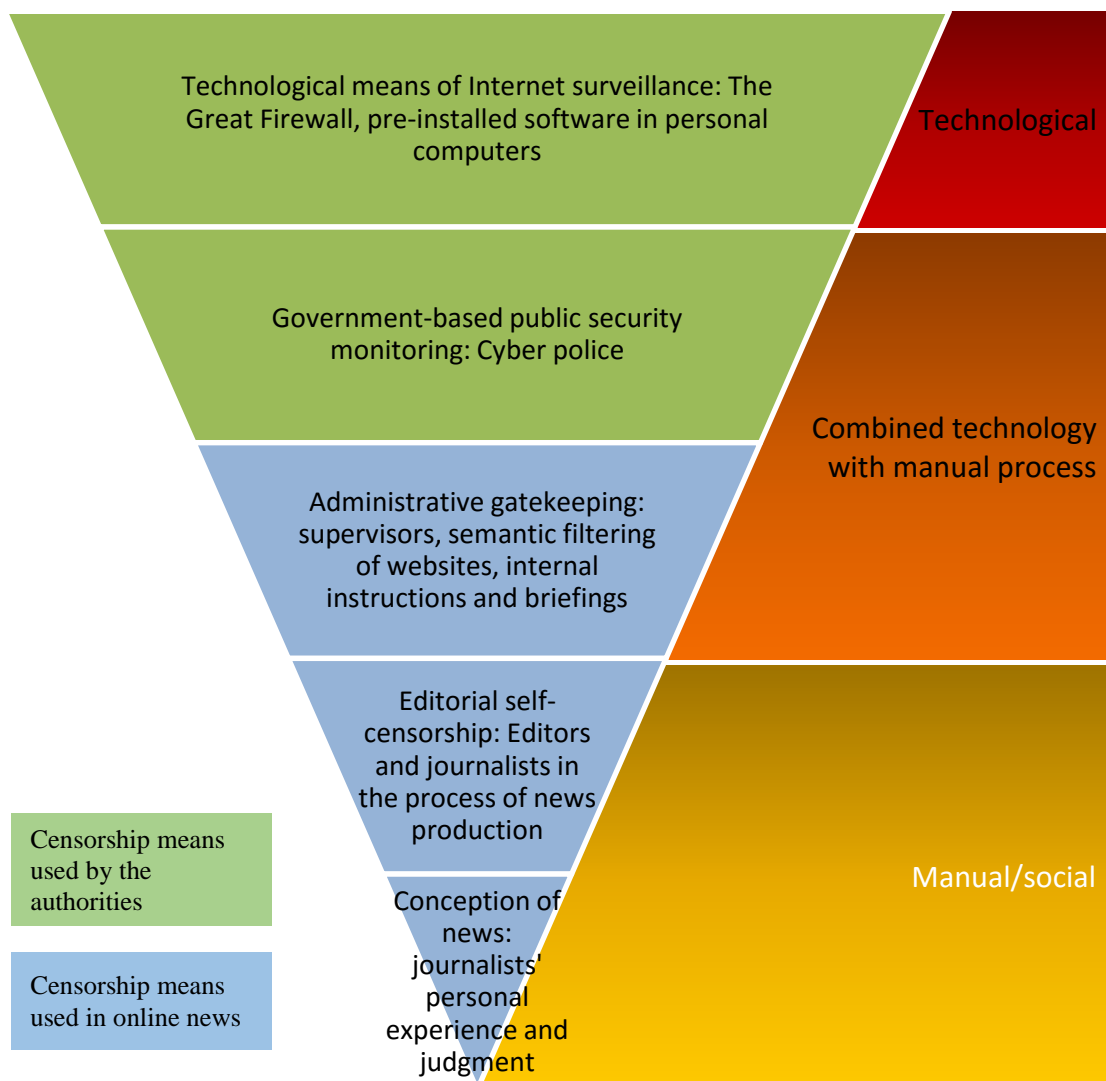


Figure 1 Mechanisms of online news censorship in China

These different modes of online censorship are applied by either technological or social methods, or by a combination of the two. The establishment of the Great Firewall and pre-installation of filtering software are of course technological interventions. Cyber police and administrative interference, including supervision in the newsroom, the semantic filtering system on news websites, and internal instructions and briefings, are examples of technological and social methods, combined. Both, the cyber police and online news, use filtering systems for the surveillance and monitoring of online news content. Lastly, social censorship methods are detected and enforced through editorial self-censorship and news conception processes.

### **1.2.6 Perspectives of the censors (the cyber police)**

This research also examines censorship from the perspective of cyber police officers and deals with issues relating to Internet surveillance of online news and common users, privacy violation and disciplinary management of online news media. The aim of studying the mechanisms of online censorship from the perspective of censors is to identify the systematic protocols of censorship they operationalise in the process of censoring the online news media. As Figure 1 indicates, activities of the cyber police encompass a combined set of processes involving technological and social elements. It directly interacts with the online news and exerts pressure on online news workers.

The cyber police are also the main force within the triangular model, where the dynamic flow of autonomy of different professional roles occurs in the matrix of the censorship of online news content. The cyber police influence the online news content through frequent communication with web administrators of online news, and their capacity to sanction enables them to interfere in the process of news production. In turn, administrators pass along such pressure to other lower-ranked news workers in the online newsroom. The

focus on the cyber police allows this research to examine and determine the source and nature of censorship pressure that directly affect the online news media.

Studying the cyber police and mechanisms of online censorship also expands this research by taking account of the perspectives of insiders. It considers not only how online news workers self-censor and how the pressure to conform interferes with the workflow of online news production, but also how the government-based censorship system operates, and how online news workers and cyber police officers interact during the process of news production.

### **1.3 The scope of the study**

As noted, this study concentrates on censorship and self-censorship in online news production in China, and examines the perception and experience of online news workers and gives an insight into the formal protocols of censorship as operationalised by the cyber police. The study is also unique in that it focuses on the practices of the cyber police and gives an examination of their perceptions and experiences of their specific role. Therefore, the scope of this study includes the perspective of online censors (the cyber police) towards the production processes of online newsrooms and activities of online news workers under the pressure of censorship. In these respects, therefore, this study is unique.

The cyber police are interviewed, in order to study the perspective of online censors and the protocol of online news censoring, so as to address issues relating to the activities of Chinese cyber police in depth. For example, the clarification of institutional mechanisms



and the functions of the cyber police. It also distinguishes the different characteristics from the perspectives of the cyber police and other civil servants in China. Likewise, contact with cyber police officers broadens the scope of this study to the institutional mechanism of online censors. By doing that, this study not only looks into what journalistic activities take place in the online newsroom, but also the external forces that occur outside the newsroom and influence these activities. Moreover, newsroom observation and interviews with online news workers further set out the scope of this study of online journalistic activities, which are happening under the pressure of censorship and administrative interference. In these respects, therefore, this study is unique.

The study therefore examines:

- 1) The organisational and hierarchical structure of online news media in China. Hierarchy and rankings in the newsroom are considered as crucial in determining to what extent an individual news worker can decide the outcome of online news content, and how much autonomy he/she possesses in the newsroom.
- 2) The different roles and responsibilities of online news workers as journalists, editors, internal censors, or pseudo commentators who pretend to be ordinary members of the public and post user comments on the news page in order to swing the direction of public opinion.
- 3) The influence that internal competition and marketisation have brought to the protocol of online content monitoring and filtering.
- 4) An in-depth analysis of different degrees of self-censorship. Definitions and clarifications of how the word ‘self’ functions in different contexts helps this research to have better understanding of the existence of different self-censoring processes in

online news production. It also identifies what exact kind of ‘self-censorship’ the participant refers to when they use the terms ‘self’ and ‘self-censorship’.

- 5) The three forces: This triangular relationship between the Party, the government and online news media is singled out, due to its importance in explaining that the protocol of online news censorship is being determined not only by journalistic activities within the online newsroom but also heavily influenced by the power matrix between these three forces.

This thesis therefore presents a holistic account of censorship of the online news environment in China.

## **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

The structure of this thesis consists of: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, a detailed account of the context of online censorship in China, Analysis, Discussion and Conclusion. Figure 2 shows the framework of the thesis, and the sequence of how these chapters are presented.

The Literature section contextualises this study by historically and conceptually framing the principles of freedom of the press and freedom of speech in China by reviewing a range of relevant literature and debates on the relationship between principles of freedom of speech, freedom of the press and Chinese history and culture. Both historically and philosophically, principles of freedom of speech and freedom of the press have been inherently linked to the Western intellectual canon. Though not considered liberal by modern standards, ideas that became associated with modern conceptions of citizenship, freedom and autonomy have their roots in the ancient Greek political and philosophical

tradition (see Steel, 2012). However, it was not until the English Civil War that the right to speak out and publish opinions gathered serious political and philosophical momentum (see Copeland, 2006). Within the Chinese context, we only start to see a clear reflection of some of these debates and ideas in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Schwartz, 2009; Feuerwerker, Murphy & Wright, 1967). However, there is a strong Chinese philosophical tradition which predates even the ancient Greek body of thought, which

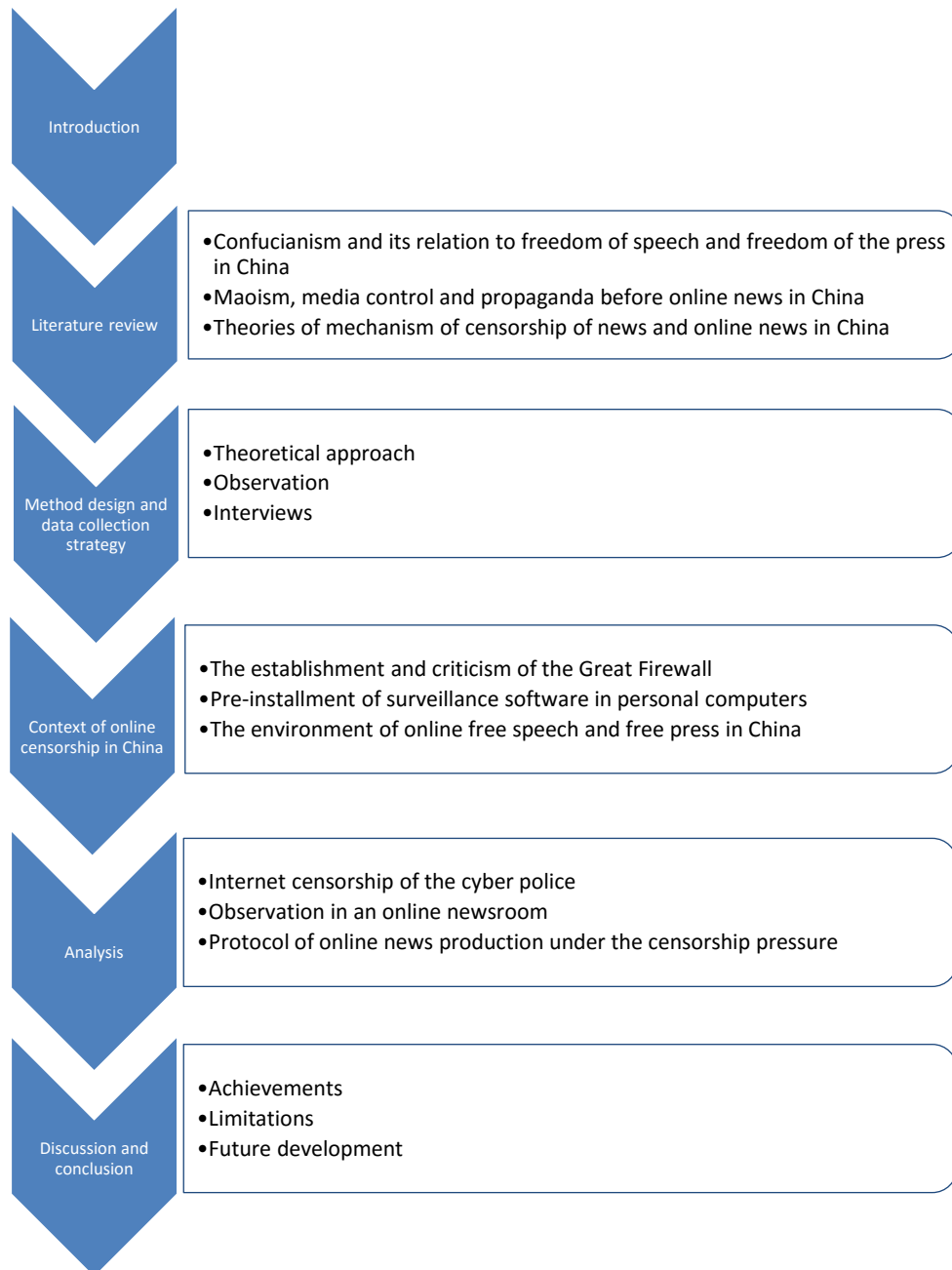


Figure 2 Layout of the structure of the thesis

arguably contributes to our modern Chinese sensibilities and ideas about freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

The Literature Review will begin by examining the elements of Chinese history and philosophy which arguably have contributed to our contemporary understanding and expectations of conceptions of freedom of the press and freedom of speech in China. Here I examine the concept of divine theory and channelisation theory, both of which emerge in pre-Confucian eras and which arguably have played a role in shaping Chinese responses to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Following a brief discussion of the significance of these ideas, the chapter goes on to discuss the significance of Confucianism as providing continuing relevance to contemporary Chinese political life. In particular, the moral core of Confucianism and its legacy in relation to debates about autonomy and freedom are examined. Continuing the historical development of these ideas in Chinese history and culture, the chapter then focuses on the May Fourth movement which provides a sharp criticism and contrast to Confucian philosophy and marks the beginning of the introduction of liberal ideas into Chinese politics and philosophy (Schwartz, 2009). This chapter then moves on to examine the debates concerning press freedom and freedom of speech under Mao Zedong (1893-1976) as this era of Chinese politics significantly shaped our contemporary experience and understanding of the roles of journalism and the scope of journalistic freedom in Chinese political life. I argue that such a conceptual framing of the parameters of speech and expression play an important role in understanding the specific ideological motivations and structural operationalisation of the protocols of censorship in China. Finally, this chapter explores literature concerning the construction of news and online news media in China and debates concerning media reform that provides a theoretical basis for my analysis in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

The Methodology chapter specifies the conceptual and methodological approach used in this research. It re-emphasises the purpose and scope of this study, and outlines the research questions accordingly. In order to provide what Geertz (1973) called ‘a thick description’ for fulfilling the research purpose, it draws an outline of the framework of research approaches and introduces the qualitative methods that have been used: observation and in-depth interviews. Details of data gathering, strategies, planning, pilot studies and limitations of both observation and interviews are introduced in this chapter.

Observation is used as an exploratory method before the interviews. It aims to obtain a set of descriptive data of the dynamic interaction of China’s online news production. In practice, field notes and a field diary were used to record journalistic activities in the newsroom during the process of production. The scope of journalistic activities covered is wide, as the fieldwork observed the work of a number of online journalists, editors and web administrators in the newsroom. These journalistic activities include the actions, reactions and interactions in relation to the acquiescence to, and negotiation with, censorship within the newsroom, the time and locations where these activities occurred, and key quotations relevant to wide-ranging subjects such as censorship of online news production, administrative instructions, control and surveillance of user-generated content, news workers’ self-regulation and political sensibilities.

In-depth interviews are used to collect empirical data of perspectives on and experiences of censorship and self-censorship within China’s online news media from the cyber police and online news workers. Two sets of enquiry questions were designed for these two groups of interviewees. Details of this semi-structured interviewing process are

elaborated in this chapter, including the snowball sampling strategy, the employment of an interview guide (see Appendix C), considerations of interviewing techniques, use of research instruments, and ethics. Data that were collected and recorded were transcribed and selectively paraphrased in Appendix E: Viewpoints of interviewees.

Analysis chapters 5, 6 & 7 focus on answering and discussing the issues that are outlined in the 'Objectives' section. Chapter 5 examines the cyber police in China and their function and orientation to online censorship. Cyber police are considered as one important method of Internet censorship for the Chinese authorities in order to control online content produced by online news workers and Internet users. This chapter will identify a number of functions of cyber police including their institutional structure, jurisdictions and roles and responsibilities regarding how they influence the process of online news production by monitoring users, pressuring online news workers, and filtering and regulating online content. Secondly, this chapter will further explore the notion of 'harmony of the Internet', a political term and a concept which is key to the political agenda for the Chinese authorities (Chen, D. 2014; Winfield & Peng, 2005). The Chinese authorities' attempts at maintaining a synchronised, unified, and anti-government-free environment in online news via the use of cyber police will be examined, and the power flow between the cyber police and online news in the process of arguing, coordinating, and negotiating over online news content will be explored from the perspectives of these censors. Thirdly, this chapter will look at different strategies and tactics that cyber police use to control and manipulate users' online activities, which further influence the online content that the user generates on news websites. The details of cyber police protocols for controlling online users, including how the users are censored, filtered, and sanctioned, with the cooperation of online news media, will be revealed. The chapter will end with discussion of a number of issues that have emerged

during the process of Internet censorship, including violation of user privacy and loopholes of the systematic firewall, which is designed to block foreign websites but is often breached and bypassed by users.

Chapter 6 investigates the roles and responsibilities of different online news workers in the online newsroom in China, and provides detailed accounts of how censorship becomes operationalised within the newsroom by interpreting and analysing observation data. The analysis will open with an introduction to the background and context of the *Wenzhou News*, a local online news media organisation in China where the observation was conducted. This is to determine and examine the influence of the hierarchical structure and the structural rankings on the output of online news content. The chapter will continue to examine the autonomy of different online news workers in the process of online news production, including online journalists, editors and web administrators, and how they respond to censorship pressures, and what role they play, and what role they play in censoring online news content. Furthermore, the chapter will investigate the protocols of censorship in the online newsroom, and clarify how the internal briefings that are regularly scheduled and held in the newsroom are set up for delivering instructions of censorship, and ensuring the authorities control the online news media and the content that they and users produce on the websites. By doing this, the mechanism of online censorship within the newsroom is therefore established and layered between the cyber police and the editorial control in the process of online news production. This chapter will further explore the roles that online journalists and editors play in filtering and censoring user-generated content that appears on the webpages. Their roles as user-generated content monitors and pseudo commentators will be discussed, as the latter is an important element for the authorities to guide and synchronise the public discussion of users, and shape the public opinion that is favourable to the harmony of the Internet. The thesis will

then discuss the journalistic tactics that online news workers use, which allow them to avoid the minefield in reporting online news whilst adhering to journalistic professionalism. These tactics, which Tong (2009) called ‘guerrilla tactics’, ensure the mediating of safe information under censorship.

Chapter 7 will begin with a discussion of the censorship protocol of critical news by interpreting and analysing data from interviews of online news workers, and investigating how online journalists and editors self-censor the online news content that they produce in order to comply with the pressure of censorship from the authorities. The different stages of censorship in the process of online news production will be distinguished, as the process of individual conception penetrates the process of editorial controls in the newsroom. There will be a discussion of the autonomy of different online news workers and how they understand the culture of ‘think before you write’ regarding balancing the news value of certain news stories with the censorship concern of keeping them politically correct. Secondly, the chapter will look at the manipulation of images, with examples from online news. By doing so, there will be a discussion of how news values can be downplayed in online news, while the political concerns of avoiding minefields and serving the propaganda purpose of the Chinese authorities are ensured. Incorporating the data from observation and interviews in this chapter, the triangular model of online censorship, which involves the power flow between online news media, the cyber police and the publicity departments, will be detailed. The matrix will then explore the coordination and restriction between these three parties whilst they influence the output of online news content in the process of online news production. Lastly, a number of issues will be discussed to complete the analysis through the insight of online news workers, including how they assess the news values and produce online news content that can comply with the pressure of censorship, identifying the elements that they consider



in producing news content that criticises the authorities and their policies, at the same time ensuring the safety of content and avoiding intervention from the authorities, and internal competition. Also recognising the reforms of marketisation that they experience can shape the mechanism of online censorship and allow the online news media to enjoy journalistic practices with less intervention from the authorities.

By analysing and constructing these different modes of censorship in the online media, this study sets up a conceptual framework of the protocols of online news censorship in China, illustrates the processes of online news production under pressure of censorship from the Chinese authorities, and argues that the concept of “harmonisation” operates within the online newsroom where specific ideological motivations and structural operationalisations influence the output of online news content.

# Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Introduction

The study fits broadly in the literature on Chinese media and journalism studies, with particular emphasis on journalism practice, media control and censorship. The particular study engages with specific literature on journalistic professionalism, gatekeeping, news values and construction of Chinese online news media, and asserts the significant factors that contribute to protocols of censorship in online news environment. This chapter aims to explain the theoretical framework of this study in following ways. Firstly, it defines key concepts of censorship and self-censorship. It explores a body of literature which define these two concepts and integrates them into China's context. This literature has reviewed and analysed journalistic practice of processing newsworthiness in general term (Harrison, 2006; Petley, 2009; Horton, 2011; Jones, 2011; Steel, 2012). In China's context, the process through which Chinese online news workers judge newsworthy in their daily journalistic practices involves a careful consideration of political sensibility. The censorship mechanisms of Chinese news differs from other Western models of journalism, as the particular perspective of criticising the authorities must be approached carefully, keeping in mind a set of formal or informal propaganda minefields (Tong, 2009: p.595; Petley, 2009). However, the undergoing media transformation has shifted the power-flow between the authorities and media organisations. With gradually autonomy, the process of inclusion and exclusion of sensitive news has also changed.

Secondly, similar to the changing process of censorship and self-censorship, Chinese online news workers have also adjusted their understanding of professionalism, news values and journalistic norms. Whilst the authorities were not showing any signs of

lessening their controls over news before 2005 (Esarey, 2005, p56), journalistic professionalism was nevertheless developed amongst Chinese online news workers. With the assistance of a fast growing Internet in China, the online news shifted their loyalty from “ideological apparatus of the state” (McNair, 2009: p.240) to the economic demands of the market (Pan & Chan, 2003, Esarey, 2005; Winfield & Pang, 2005). Objectivity and press freedom, for instance, were “elevated” (Pan & Chan, 2003: p.653). Throughout this re-construction of news media, Lo *et al.* (2005) argue that Chinese online news still have to balance the intertwined flow between commercialisation and political uncertainty. However, there is a significant trend indicating that news workers in China are a distinct occupational group rather than individuals who work for a propaganda mechanism (Zhao, 2000; Tong & Sparks, 2009).

The different approaches to gatekeeping and understanding of news values are also significant. With the aim of promoting a positive image of a stable and harmonious society within news media, some general news values such as commitment to truth, frequency, amplitude, negativity (Harrison, 2006; Brighton & Foy, 2007) can be downplayed in Chinese news media. In the process of gatekeeping, this phenomena is considered distinctive in China’s news industry as argued by Zhao (2000) who identified the press orbiting the state (2000: p.3) as a significant form of press control in authoritarian China. However, a number of studies have indicated that China’s media landscape has been drastically influenced by marketisation (Xu *et al.* 2002; Winfield & Pang, 2005; Esarey, 2005), and the growing online media has accelerated the process of shifting media organisations from being a propaganda mouthpiece for the communist authorities to “business entities” (Winfield & Pang, 2005: p.260). As a result, the tolerance of the Chinese authorities has been tested, and news about officials’ corruption and scandals, and criticism of government policies gets reported.

The media landscape transformation has also had an impact on how the media organisations are constructed. Before the Internet era, from the late 1980s, there was a developing trend of activism of political campaigns in China (Yang, 2009). These campaigns were extended and expanded to a broader range of political positions, including calls to adjust and refine the authorities' institutions and methods of controlling the press (Yang, 2009: p.48). Online news media, in particular, are featuring news content that feeds the demands of their advertisers, the market and the public, a form of re-construction which Winfield and Pang (2005) have argued is 'similar to a western capitalism system with advertising, subscription dependence, and capital investment' (2005: p.260). Drawing on these theories, this study explores journalistic practices in online newsrooms in China, and the perspectives of Internet censors/cyber police and online news workers in China's context.

## **2.2 Defining censorship and self-censorship**

To answer these theoretical questions, concepts of censorship and self-censorship need to be defined. It is necessary to highlight clearly that censorship of news media also exists in democratic societies. Freedom of expression is not absolute, even in western democratic societies (Petley, 2009: p.1-2), and it is certainly not equally valued across all cultures (Horton, 2011). This study, however, focuses on how online censorship in China fits into existing definitions of the various forms of censorship in the modern world. In broader terms, the forms of censorship that Jones (2011) defines as follows:

*“(Censorship is) a variety of process [...] formal and informal, overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, by which restrictions are imposed on the collection, display,*

*dissemination, and exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and imaginative expression”*  
(Jones, 2011).

Research by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in 2011 indicated that there was no evidence to confirm that journalists were murdered in China due to their reporting (Earp, 2011). However, less dramatic forms of censorship are conducted by the Chinese government to oversee and filter online news content. Petley (2009) illustrates a number of tactics that one authority can use to effectively control and censor news, including preventing contentious material from being produced in the first place, licensing of the press to control which permits are approved, as well as listing banned work and forbidding people from both publishing or accessing them (Petley, 2009: p.3-4). He further extends these mechanisms of censorship to the Internet by arguing that cyberspace is also under censorship in both authoritarian and democratic countries. This study examines how these mechanisms are used by Chinese authorities who increasingly attempt to control the Internet. The hierarchy and the embedded party organisation within online news media allow the authorities to prevent or ban online news content which they believe may pose “threats to its monopoly on power” (Petley, 2009: p.101).

Petley (2009) argues that in the case of online censorship in China, the Internet was built by the Chinese authorities to “support and maintain its fast-growing economy”, and at the same time allow them to control any monopoly on power (Petley, 2009: p.101). Assisted by sophisticated information barriers such as the Great Firewall, online content on various topics is blocked or filtered in China. As Petley suggests:

*“Analysis of blocked material shows [...] that this involves subjects which the government believes would endanger nation security, conflict with official*

*viewpoints, enable people to contact illegal organisations or organise illegal gatherings” (Petley, 2009: p.105).*

Considering that controlling the Internet by “preventing contentious material from being produced in the first place” seems to be of fundamental importance to the authorities to maintain control over information, creating an atmosphere of vigilant self-censorship within the online newsroom becomes significant. In general terms, Horton (2011) describes self-censorship as a common phenomenon where people “deliberately” avoid discussing a topic because it is likely to cause offence (Horton, 2011: p.93). In essence, self-censorship is a restriction where one tries to prevent him or herself from expressing particular ideas and perspectives (Horton, 2011: p.94). These particular ideas and perspectives are understood by Chinese news workers as ‘minefield’ areas, or a ‘propaganda minefield’ (Tong, 2009: p.595), which formally or informally prohibit media from reporting and covering news freely.

Historical developments have shown that marketisation has diminished the Communist Party’s dominance over the media since the 1980s and that the Chinese news workers are gaining autonomy (Tong, 2009; Chan & Qiu, 2002), but there are still numerous politically sensitive topics that they have to avoid. This is where the considerations of inclusion and exclusion of news information happen in the process of news conception and editing. Tong (2009) argues that the editorial process, in general, is also a self-censoring one, as inclusion and exclusion are understood to be practices of the politics of self-censorship (Tong, 2009: p.594). This study will examine if the outlined assessment is also applicable and reflected in editorial processes in online news media in China.

## 2.3 Professionalism in Chinese journalism

This section contextualises and explores journalistic professionalism within China's context in reference to existing concepts on journalistic professionalism and normative claims. As Drechsel (2000) argues, journalistic professionalism, throughout its historical development, has been understood as “essential for quality, legitimacy, credibility, and respect” of journalists (2000: p.181). In ‘The Handbook of Journalism Studies’, Schudson and Anderson (2009) examine two major strands of scholarship in the field of journalism studies. The first focuses on journalism being “self-evident” and not dependent on its status in a hierarchy of occupations, and the second focuses on the character of journalistic knowledge (2009: p.89-98). These strands are both problematic as Schudson and Anderson (2009) argue:

*“While the first strand suffers from its [...] adoption of the “trait perspective” on the professions, the second strand confuses journalistic objectivity with journalistic professionalism per se” (Schudson & Anderson, 2009:p.88-9).*

Objectivity is seen as an important professional norm within journalism (Soloski, 1989). Practiced by journalists, objectivity requires news workers to “seek out the facts and report them as fairly and in as balanced a way as possible” (Soloski, 1989: p.213). Arguably, objectivity allows news workers to produce work that best reflects elements of the two strands summarised above (Schudson & Anderson, 2009: p.99). However, it needs to be noted that objectivity is not a definitive professional norm in many non-American media systems where professionalism exists (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), such as, in the Chinese media being explored in this study.

Josephi (2009: p.51) argues that the ideology of objectivity can be a cover for loyalty, and is found in a majority of the world's nations, including in China where the ideology of loyalty accommodates a form of investigative reporting. Thus, China's political ideology should be considered when studying Chinese journalism. McNair (2009: p.240) argues that the authoritarian approach underpins the practice of political journalism in socialist states such as China, where journalism is "institutionally part of the ideological apparatus of the state". Schudson and Anderson (2009: p.94) also indicate that the social function of the objectivity norm in American journalism may be different to that in Chinese journalism, as journalists in China work with norms other than objectivity. There is a political demand for journalists to support a dominant ideology "imposed by the ruling political faction" (McNair, 2009: p.241). Nevertheless, the Internet and online media are perceived to be a challenge to this dominant ideology, as Kalathil and Boas (2010) conclude from their research that the Internet has helped China, along with other countries such as Cuba and Singapore, to transform authoritarianism and pursue the "objective of building democracy and free media" (McNair, 2009, p.241; Kalathil & Boas, 2010).

It has been argued that the relevance of journalistic professionalism in China's context is ambiguous (Lee, 1994:p9) The transformation of Chinese news media is taking place alongside political reformation (Zhao, 2000; Hutters, 2003). Before the transformation that started in the late 1980s, Chinese media was integrated within the structure of communist politics (Lin, 1970). It has been argued that the media's transformation and marketisation have eroded the Party-press ideology, and "potentially elevate the canons of journalistic professionalism, such as objectivity and press freedom" (Pan & Chan,



2003:p.653). In this period, Chinese journalists who were pressed to follow both the party line and ‘bottom line’ (Zhao, 1998) improvised ways of practicing journalism to “stay afloat in the tide of commercialization and political uncertainty” (Lo, Chan & Pan, 2005: p.156). Journalistic professionalisation has been influenced by this transformation in China; although the Chinese authorities tried to maintain continued control over news media, the media organisations have shifted towards marketization:

*“The transitional nature of China has rendered journalism paradigms in a state of flux, with the party ideals of journalism intertwined with professionalism imported primarily from outside China and blatant commercialism” (Lo, Chan & Pan, 2005:p.156).*

Although journalistic professionalism in China is arguably fragmented and inconsistent (Chan, Lee & Pan, 2006), the transformation has assisted its development amongst Chinese news workers. Tong and Sparks (2009) indicate that Chinese journalists conceive of themselves as less dependent on political power and more so as a distinct occupational group with a distinct social function (Tong & Sparks, 2009). This can be seen as “an extension of a [...] Chinese tradition of public intellectuals articulating society’s conscience” as well as a reflection of “analogies with western conceptions of journalistic professionalism” (Tong & Sparks, 2009: p.340). This encourages Chinese journalists to act as watchdogs and report corruption and scandals, otherwise considered as contradictory to the interests of the authorities.

In the Chinese case, the marketplace is considered a driving force for news workers to strive for autonomy. Xu *et al.* (2000) highlight that market consciousness is turning journalism education into a testing ground for the limits of the authorities’ tolerance, as

China's journalism education has been "characterized by gradual movement towards the market without seriously violating traditional normative of propaganda" (Xu *et al.*, 2000: p.75).

It is also worth noting that news organisations need not devote money and time to establishing training programs for new journalists. This appears to be universal, as Soloski (1998: p.212) indicates that professional journalistic norms of conduct are already established during the journalists' professional education. With their education and on-the-job professional training combined, news workers come to an understanding of shared professional norms (Soloski, 1998: p.213 cited from Johnstone, *et al.*, 1976: p.65). Nevertheless, Soloski (1998: p.213) also argues that these shared professional norms do not guarantee a problem-free existence for news organisations, because professionalism provides journalists with freedom and "an independent power base that can be used to thwart heavy-handed interference by management in professional activities of the news staff."

## **2.4 Gatekeeping in Chinese news media**

The term of 'gatekeeper' was first applied to journalists in the late 1940s, and subsequent studies were followed in 1966. 'Mr Gates', who was described as 'a decision maker', picked those stories that he liked and believed his readers wanted, and discarded the rest (Singer, 1997; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Singer stated that the process of gatekeeping and decision-making is dependent on the personal judgement or "self-perception" on one person's own terms, as she argued:

*The gatekeepers see to it that the community shall hear as a fact only those events which the newsman, as the representative of his culture, believes to be true (Singer, 1997, p. 73).*

She further argued the role of journalists in that process in the context of “a democratic society”:

*The journalist’s self-perception as the one who decides what people need to know seems deeply ingrained ... the journalist wants to select his own stories, to treat them as he feels appropriate, and in doing so, to serve the needs of a democratic society in which information plays a central role (Singer, 1997 p. 73).*

Canter (2014) also argued that the role of gatekeeper of news media is through development, as the traditional gatekeeper becomes a professional verifier of online news media (Canter, 2014). Modern journalists, as Canter redefined them, are “... able to fulfil their traditional roles of acting as watchdogs, quality controlling, analysers and storytellers, while using the tools of modern technology” (Canter, 2014 p. 112).

In the context of online news media in China, these definitions and redefinitions are also applicable, as online journalists in China also fulfil the role of watchdogs, quality controls, and analysers and storytellers in the print and online working environment. However, the harmonisation that is forced by the Chinese authorities as a requirement of the online news media must be singled out, as this requirement impacts upon the self-perception of journalists to a great extent and is decisive in the outcome of news production. Reformed

through the nation's salvation, the harmonisation that had mainly been propagandised by the Chinese authorities was seen as an official doctrine for "... constructing a modernised socialist country" (Hu, 2007). Yet some have argued that the atmosphere of harmony between Chinese citizens and the State was broken by the influence of Western civilisation since the economic reforms in the 1980s (Zhang, 1999: p. 177; He, 2004; Hong, 2006).

This culture of harmonisation has its historical background. In the Qing dynasty, the ministers rested in a lounge in the morning for their daily meetings with the emperors. On the lounge wall an embroidered silk banner read: 'A prevailing mood of harmony'. The slogan reminded the ministers in the room to argue with dignity and maintain a harmonious atmosphere (Hucker, 1975). The contemporary concept of harmonisation or of "... constructing a harmonious society" (Hu, 2007) was derived from the meaning of 'kind', 'polite', 'peaceful' and 'developed' as being accordant and trouble-free in a contemporary context. It evolved as a form of reciprocal protection in political circles and a way of maintaining the fragile peace between the publicity departments and news media or among different government departments themselves. Its meaning of 'harmonious mood' was extracted and expounded by Hu Jintao, the former Chinese president and the Party's chief secretary from 2005 – 2013. His political agenda emphasised the importance of preserving a stable trend for economic development and maintaining the mood of social harmony at all times. His proposition of harmonisation stemmed from his early claim of avoiding self-inflicted setbacks (Goodman, 1990) and became the guideline for the stabilisation of government and control of news media after he came to power. The emphasis on harmonisation can be seen as a softer and reformed version of Deng Xiaoping's political agenda, which emphasised that maintaining stability is an overriding

priority (Goodman, 1990). The propaganda activities which aimed to maintain harmony were intended to serve the purpose of developing the economy as the first priority (Hu, 2007; Zhang, 2011). To emphasise the importance of harmony, the concept itself was portrayed as having a pivotal role in "... the mission of re-rise of Chinese awakening and revival" (Hu, 2007), which is also linked with the nationalistic salvation, discussed earlier in this chapter.

Harmonisation is therefore associated with journalistic practice and gatekeeping in China, in an approach reinforcing nationalistic salvation and how Maoism was associated with journalism. It heavily influences the mechanism of gatekeeping in the news media industry and the design of filtering tools for censorship in print and online news media, when there is "... ambiguous criticism of party/government officials and local-level party and government policies, even though this type of criticism is still very limited, controlled, and constrained" (Hong, 2006: p. 299). However, different understandings of having a harmonised environment in print and the online news media by journalists and other news workers who are involved in the gatekeeping process leaves "... loopholes to circumvent", as Lam (2000) argued, and it is later confirmed in *Chapter 6:4.4* and *Chapter 7:4* that these loopholes allow online news workers in China to resist and create leverage against the pressure of censorship:

*Internal ideological and power struggles played out through the media, [...] and the marketplace, too, have offered journalists new and innovative loopholes to circumvent the central authorities (Lam, 2000, p. 42).*

## 2.5 News values: the Communist Party's interest as a news value

What are 'news values' in journalism? And what are 'news values' in China's journalism? To better understand how news values in China fit within or depart from other journalism models in the West it is crucial to define this concept in general terms at an early stage of this study. Galtung and Ruge (1965) introduce a brief overview of the criteria that consists of a set of values which can turn an event into a news item (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Brighton & Foy, 2007: p.7) and includes relevance, timeliness, simplification, predictability, and so on.. Galtung and Ruge apply a further set of core system qualifiers which include frequency, amplitude, clarity, meaningfulness, among others. However, in adopting these for the analysis of Chinese news media, this research has to carefully examine their applicability in China's context taking into consideration the specific social and cultural accounts of news values (Harrison, 2006: pp.18-38).

Defined by Harrison (2006), news is that which "is judged to be newsworthy by journalists, who exercise their news sense within the constraints of the news organisations within which they operate" (Harrison, 2006: p.13). It is a process that allows journalists to select what they assess as 'being newsworthy' from a set of sources, such as press releases, newspapers, telegrams, tip-offs, and Internet services (Schultz, 2007). Palmer (2000, p. 45) notes that this process transcends individual judgment "although of course they are to be found embodied in every news judgment made by particular journalists". Therefore, it has been argued that this process of judging newsworthiness or news value, and decisions about the *inclusion* and *exclusion* of material can be developed through ongoing engagement in and performance of journalistic practices and socialisation (Harrison: 2006; O'Neill & Harcup, 2009)

*'News values'*, as Steel (2012) notes, is a general term which applies to the framework of principles, norms, and dispositions within which the news is constructed (2012: pp. 170–1). They are essential tools and informal 'ground rules' for journalists to work with that enable them to select and write stories that are appropriate for their news organisation. These ground rules, as Harcup and O'Neil (2001) argue, "... may not be written down or codified by news organisations, but they exist in daily practice and in knowledge gained on the job, albeit mediated by subjectivity on the part of individual journalists" (Harcup & O'Neil, 2001: p. 261). Steel (2012) also argued that it was informal limits that set the criteria; journalists "... making judgement about what is and is not newsworthy" (Steel, 2012: p. 171). These informal ground rules are based on subjectivity and individuality and routinely lead journalists to self-censor. Reflecting organisational cultures, routines and hierarchies, or "habitual conventions" (Fowler, 2013: p.25), the different understanding of newsworthiness among journalists shapes frameworks and affects the final product.

However, even according to Western terms, news values are a "slippery concept" (O'Neil & Harcup, 2009: p.162) and challenging to grasp, as different news organisations may place different emphasis on different news values, according to their specific readership (Steel, 2012; O'Neil & Harcup, 2009). This argument, in a broader sense, may be universal as it does not apply only to Western news media, but to Chinese ones also. There are comprehensive examples of how news values differ across news organisations in Britain (Steel, 2012: p. 171 references Brighton & Foy, 2007; Conboy, 2010; Conboy, 2012). In terms of readership, Chinese media also adjust news angles according to

different audiences (He & Zhu, 2002). Zhang (2000) indicates there is a trend in China that the marketization of news media emphasises its capacity to deliver information to an effective readership. This requires Chinese journalists to produce according to the interests of their majority audience. Therefore, Chinese journalists are also required to judge the newsworthiness of sources, assess their value to the news organisation and its audience, and produce news stories accordingly. These examples of how news values differ across news organisations in Britain can also be found among Chinese news organisations. For example, the news values of, say, *The People's Daily*, will be very different to those of *Apple Daily*. The former tends to present hard news with features and comment on international and domestic political events, (Luther & Zhou, 2005: p.862) while the latter tends to focus on stories in keeping with its tabloid identity (Flowerdew & Leong, 2007), such as gossip, celebrity, and the entertainment industry.

There are a number of instructions on ways in which news elements and sources can affect the outcome of a news product (Harrison: 2006; O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). Perhaps the principles outlined by Steel (2009: pp. 584–5) can provide significant guidance. These principles are: 1) Journalism has a commitment to truth and to inform the public; 2) News also provides entertainment to those who read it; 3) Journalism has an important role in contributing to the moral fabric of societies and helps reflect and shape [...] identity; 4) Journalism should also be expressive of a deeper sense of humanity in playing an important role in breaking down barriers between different people and different cultures; and 5) Journalism is also about making judgement and comment (Steel, 2009: p. 584–5). These arguments were made in the context of the democratic environment. Journalism in China is somewhat different.



A general assumption is that China is not a democratic country. Tsai (2007) argued that China can be considered to be a capitalist country without democracy, whereas others may argue that there are strong signs of political reform proceeding, as democracy is somewhat accommodated and institutionalised (O'Brien & Li, 2000; Shi, 1999; Ferdinand, 2000). In this thesis, the researcher does not intend to explore whether this 'democracy' in China is genuine or not. However, the discussion of freedom of press cannot be isolated from the discussion of the machinery of democratic societies. As Steel (2012) explains:

*... the legal and political structures of democratic societies have developed to encompass a free media as part and parcel of the machinery of democratic societies. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press in particular, it is argued, oil the wheels of democracy and enable it to function according to its central tenets (Steel, 2012: p. 169).*

Despite all the acknowledgement of news values across the journalistic practice in the West, the news media in China are significantly different, as these news values were undermined or compromised under the *domination* of the CCP—the word *domination* is used here over the term *dictatorship*, as the CCP's Soviet Union/Communist form of control was different from the authoritarian dictatorship of feudal China. The significance of the status of Chinese news media, which Zhao (2000:p.3) refers to as the press "orbiting the party state", is how news values in China depart from other global models. Zhao (1998) argues that none of the news values, such as the commitment to truth, providing entertainment, or other elements that compose the idea of journalism, are as important as reflecting the interests of the authorities in China:

*The central concept that underlies the Party's domination over the media is the 'Party principle' (dangxing yuanze): ... the news media must accept the Party's guiding ideology as its own; they must propagate the Party's programs, policies, and directives; and they must accept the Party's leadership and stick to the Party's organizational principle and press policies (Zhao, 1998, p. 19; Bing, T. & Mei, C., 1993, p. 148).*

Thus, in assessing the news values of a particular news story, the 'Party principle' has to be prioritised. Journalists and news workers who act as gatekeepers, a subject which will be revisited in the analysis in *Chapter 7.3.1*, were determined to sustain their gatekeeping role by either compromising other news values, or looking for loopholes in the censorship policy to circumvent. Lam (2000) pointed out that the absence of clear-cut laws has left many journalists frustrated and vulnerable to the whims of CCP officials, and the "... vague media laws and regulations encourage self-censorship" (Lam, 2000, pp. 37–46).

The Chinese news media is undergoing a process of transformation (Zhao, 2000; Tong, 2009; Winfield & Peng, 2005), alongside other rapid changes in society, politics and economy (Huters, 2003). This process is arguably accelerated by the growth of the Internet (Yang, 2003). The downside, Zhang (2011) argued, is that the rise of the Internet allowed the Chinese authorities to extend its dominance from print and television to online news media, allowing Communist propaganda to hegemonize. However, there is some belief that marketization and commercialisation of China's news media have had a liberalising effect (Esarey, 2005; Xu, Chu, & Zhongshi, 2002). Esarey (2005: p.56) argues that commercialisation shifts the media's loyalty from the Party to the advertisers, "who through a media organisation's appeal to consumers, provide the bulk of revenue".

Zhao (2000: pp.3-4) indicates that a number of paradoxical phenomena exist throughout this transformation. While market competition has intensified for some news media, the Party has shown few signs of retreat and maintains mechanisms of control over news media content. With regard to media ownership and financial support, Winfield and Peng (2005) argued as follows:

*“The commercialization of the press drastically influenced China’s media landscape [...] With media commercialization, the Party and government organs were becoming business entities, similar to a western capitalist system with advertising, subscription dependence and capital investment.” (Winfield & Peng, 2005: p.260)*

The influence of this shift was that many Chinese news media organisations gradually gained financial autonomy, which began to have an impact on their final product and media functions. The relationship between the media organisations and the government was also influenced (Zhao, 2000; Winfield & Peng, 2005: p.260). As a result, Chinese news media started reporting on cases of corruption by officials and a few of them became whistle-blowers uncovering scandals; efforts formally considered to be contradictory to the interests of the Party. During transformation, some Chinese media were encouraged to produce market-oriented content, that is, minimise the effect of the Party interests and instead concentrate on other news values due to the financial interests in operation. Arguably, the development of market forces weakening Chinese authorities’ control over media content is a significant characteristic of media transformation.

## 2.6 The Organisation of news and online news media in China

There are a number of studies that have described media systems in China (See details in Chen Huailin and Lee, 1998; de Burgh, 2003; and Lam, 2000). This institutional system in which the media have been situated since 1949 comprises several distinct organisations, themselves appertaining either to the State or the CCP (de Burgh, 2003: p. 19). Lam (2000) described the framework of media organisations:

*Most media outlets are official organs or subordinate units of the CCP and government organisations. All heads of key media units are appointed by the CCP Central Committee's Organisation Departments, or its local equivalent, and all report to the various propaganda departments of the CCP (Lam, 2000, p. 41).*

Zhao (1998) and Chu (1994) argued that throughout history and since the establishment of the CCP this form of media institution could have been reclaimed, as students and intellectuals "... voiced their opposition to imperialism and to Chinese warlords" (1998: p. 19). As he described:

*The Party principle and the mouthpiece theory are constantly being emphasized and reinforced as the Party struggles to maintain control of the media. ... Mao Zedong himself issued many directives to high Party leaders on the importance of maintaining complete control of the press and overcoming tendencies toward independence among propaganda workers (Zhao, 1998 p. 19).*

The Party established "... organs and non-Party publications that were nevertheless under its leadership" (Zhao, 1998 p. 14), which still can be considered as the dominant feature of Chinese journalism today, as the post-Mao leadership continues to stress the theory of maintaining control of the press. For instance, Hu Yaobang, the former General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP (in office from 1982 to 1987), in a widely publicised speech in 1985 stated: "The Party's journalism is the Party's mouthpiece" (Hu, 1985).

With reference to the conception of journalists and the audience, Lee (2005) explored the continuities and discontinuities of three press models that had characterised modern China: Confucian liberal, Maoist, and communist/capitalist journalists. The Confucian liberal and Maoist journalists were discussed earlier in this chapter. The communist/capitalist media, however, was understood as paradoxically negotiating between communist ideological control and capitalist market operation (Lee, 2005: pp. 117–21). The communist/capitalist journalists, as Lee analysed, remained virtually the employees of the State following the reformation from the late 1980s onward, but with different journalistic approaches in the news media. They had dual roles of ideological correctness and commercial profit. Their roles in news media were more like those of information providers rather than the Party cadres. The conception of the audience tends to be more market-orientated, and their journalistic practices have been more empirical, fieldwork-styled, and investigative. Yet they still have had an obligation to serve. Their dual roles had required the purpose of propaganda and of keeping uniformity of ideology as part of their political correctness, which refers to having sensibilities to where the minefields or taboos are in political discussion and keeping away from them. Here, the dual roles of ideological or political correctness and commercial profit in the media

industry in China do not apply only to the news workers of newspapers and TV, but also those working in the digital and online news environment.

Like other journalists in general, the roles and functions of Chinese journalists also relate to "... the context and environment in which they work and the economic and temporal pressures they are under" (Steel, 2009 p. 583). As Steel wrote:

*Contemporary thinking about journalism's role and function is not clear-cut and without controversy. ... More critical analyses of journalism, however, stress the role it plays in helping maintain established positions of power within societies (Steel, 2009: p. 583).*

For Chinese journalists, the burden of being propaganda workers had been lightened along with the process of political reform. On the other hand, the economic pressures have increased. The system of the news media institutions in China proceeded through reforms of media marketisation (de Burgh, 2003, pp. 26–9). The production process of online news media also passed through a transformation into the market-driven environment. To stress the importance of paradoxical implications of marketisation in communist/capitalistic journalism, the paradoxical phenomena of online news media would easily find its theoretical ground. For instance, the construction of the online newsroom was formed under both the pressure of commercial profit and the hallmarks of the Party's control, which the later analysis *Chapters of 7: 7.4.4* will examine.

There are also arguments about the purported potential of the Internet to provide a space in which free speech may flourish (McNair, 2006 pp. 57–60). The significant growth of the Internet since the mid-1990s has placed debate about the potential consequences of this new media in the political process, as van de Donk *et al.* (2004) argued that most observers of the digital democracy were quite “subtle” about the impact of this evolution, and did not believe that it would “... radically transform democracy in either a positive or a negative way” (van de Donk *et al.*, 2004: p. 97; Loader, 2005). The sense of urgency with which the Chinese authorities have sought to control the Internet in China reflects the perception that the Internet does indeed provide a valuable space for free speech, as Castells (1991: pp. 168–9) argued that the innovations of information technology provided a powerful tool for organisational restructuring.

In a broader sense, Nunziato (2009: p. 5) argued that studies that considered incidents of censorship and other forms of discrimination by broadband providers found them difficult to establish or document with precision. Firstly, the average users might be unaware that the broadband provider was blocking some content that they should have access to. Secondly, providers might simply deny that they blocked undesirable content and refused to provide the information necessary for users to confirm or deny such restrictions.

Yang (2009) linked the development of activism in China from the late 1980s before the era of the Internet, to a boom in online protests and campaigns in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2009: pp. 29–31). Yang further categorised the evolution of China’s Internet-controlling regime in three phases, as the government responded to the challenge

of online activism by “... adjusting and refining its institutions and methods of control” (2009: p. 48). From 1994 to 2009, the evolution moved from the stages of network security regulation, Internet service provision, and institutional restructuring, to the stage of expanding and refining Internet control over Internet content-providers (ICPs) and individual consumers. Under the command of Hu Jingtao, the fourth generation of the Party leaders in China, the guidelines for strengthening Internet control were then set out. The *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Regarding the Strengthening of the Party’s Ability to Govern* in 2004 ensured the dominant control of the Party over the Internet, as its terms read:

*Attach great importance to the influence of the Internet and other new media on public opinion, step up the establishment of a management institution that integrates legal binding, administrative monitoring and management, occupational self-discipline, and technical guarantees, strengthen the building of an Internet propaganda team, and forge the influence of positive opinion on the Internet (Wang, 2004)*

It is therefore the new framework of Internet control encompassing institutional structure, legal instruments, self-discipline, and professionalism (Knight & Horrocks, 2010) for news workers, technological insurance, and proactive propaganda and public opinion channelisation/orientation (Yang, 2009). Castells (1991) argued that in the contemporary era of new technologies in information, centralisation in organisational decision-making was no longer dominant. It is arguable that a limited style of criticism of officials and the government’s policies in China’s news media is indeed a reflection of this perception (Cheng & White, 1991), which indicates that the exposure of societal problems is no longer a taboo. These criticisms and exposures of course are limited, controlled and filtered by the authorities (Hong, 2006: pp. 299–300). For optimists, the Party’s relaxation



of ideological control over news media is seen as a sign of democratisation in China (Hong, 2006). However, Tong (2011) described a different landscape of the Chinese media in which investigative journalism flourished in the 1990s, peaked around 2003, but has become harsher during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The illustrated landscape demonstrated a decline in investigative news reports in both their quality and quantity under the pressure of government intervention and re-constraining of ideology control in the news media (Tong, 2011).

Tong (2011) summarised a number of tactics that the central and local government had adopted to interfere with the news media which had posed a great threat to local authorities via investigative reporting: issuing official regulations to forbid investigative reports, issuing reporting instructions and bans to newsrooms, and blocking journalists' access to information and news sources (Tong, 2011: pp. 54–6). These methods of interference resulted in resistance from the news workers. Tong (2009, 2011) also listed a number of factors that preserve Chinese investigative journalism. Many of them are relevant and will be expanded on, referred to, and revisited in the later analysis (*Chapter 6: 4.4, & Chapter 7: 5.2*). These relevant factors are:

- 1) Central government's paradoxical attitude to investigative journalism seems to swing between a loosening and a tightening of media controls.
- 2) Media organisations are concerned about maintaining their popularity and credibility with the readers, which would consequently relate to their commercial profit.
- 3) Journalistic professionalism contributes to the survival of 'watchdog' journalism in

China, and the institutionalisation within the media organisation makes practising investigative journalism not part of the journalists' individual activities, but part of the media's organisational activity.

- 4) A number of counterstrategies, which Tong (2009) called "guerrilla tactics" and the author names "journalistic tricks" (see *Chapter 6: 4.4*), ensure information can be mediated safely under censorship.
- 5) The Internet also contributes to the survival of investigative journalism, as it provides online resources and exaggerates the influences of reports, which the central and local authorities cannot repress (Tong, 2011).

Although Tong's analysis of investigative journalism in China was mainly concerned with offline activities, it may also be applied to online news activities. The analysis of the tortuous development and strategies and counterstrategies of Chinese investigative journalism can also be extended to the level of the online news media, as both of them can be considered as practising the role of watchdog journalism in China. Also, the online news media were constrained by the authorities in a similar way to how investigative journalism in newspapers and TV was constrained. The media reform in China that de Burgh (2003) recognised was thus reversing its position from authoritarian to libertarian to some extent, although the Party's control over the media was not loosened enough, to conclude anything other than that the press in China is now still considered to be an instrument of government.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted literature that this study aims to locate. It identifies key fields, including news values, gatekeeping, construction of online/offline news media in China and journalistic professionalism. The chapter firstly looks at existing definitions of the key concepts of this study: censorship and self-censorship. Although many theories have defined these concepts in general terms (Petley, 2009; Jones, 2011; Horton, 2011), the struggle for autonomy within the online newsroom in China is still problematic (Tong, 2009). This leads to questions about journalistic professionalism in the context of China's online news media. How important is objectivity in China's online news media? And under what circumstances would it be undermined? Schudson and Anderson (2009) argue that Chinese journalists may operate according to journalistic normative other than objectivity, and Josephi (2009) also indicates that in China, the ideology of objectivity can be a cover for loyalty towards the authority.

Therefore, an understanding of news values in China may have departed from the Western schools of journalism, according to which journalists judge what is newsworthy (Harrison, 2006; Conboy, 2010 & 2012; Steel, 2012). As McNair (2009) argues, there is political demand for journalists to support a dominant ideology "imposed by the ruling political faction" (2009: p.241). Chinese news workers, online or offline, are required to serve the propaganda and sustain uniformity of ideology as a way to exercise political correctness (Zhao, 1998; Lee, 2005). This situation, however, is arguably experiencing a transformation, as marketisation (de Burgh, 2003), technology (McNair 2006), and journalism education (Kalathil & Boas, 2010) push the boundaries of online news reporting and test the tolerance of Chinese authorities.

The next chapter will begin exploring how the concepts of freedom of speech and freedom of the press were historically introduced, developed, and associated with Chinese philosophical schools as they relate to autonomy and the concept of individual freedom. It will further introduce the historical and social background of online censorship in China, in order to contribute to the construction of the previously identified inverted censorship pyramid.

# Chapter 3 Literature review

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores, in the context of Chinese journalism, how the concepts of freedom of speech and freedom of the press were historically introduced, developed, and associated with Chinese philosophical schools as they relate to autonomy and the concept of individual freedom. In connecting the theory of freedom of speech with the notion of freedom of the press, Steel (2012) presented a thorough description for the development of how, in British, US and French traditions, journalism and freedom of the press were associated with liberalism and democracy (Steel, 2012: pp. 24–40; Schauer, 1982; Kelly, 2005; Levine, 2002). The democratic tradition can be traced back to its origin in ancient Greece. Democracy did not develop during the enlightenment, rather certain relationships between individuals and the state, the role of reason in politics and the principles of public sovereignty started to be forged. There were a few signs of what we would identify as ‘liberty’ today (Gray, 1984; Grey, 1986; Barendt, 2005; Brenkert, 1991). Arguably, the ancient world had a conception of liberty that was somewhat different from that held in modern times. However, the modern liberal viewpoint, as Gray (1984: pp.7-8) argued, “... feels immediately at home in Greece”, since the content of Greek freedom “... involved a number of rights and privileges”. Rawls is ultimately concerned that people act freely but in ways that do not undermine the liberty of others (Steel, 2012: p11; Rawls, 1972). Followed by his discussion of the rise of censorship and control, Steel then explores a historical review of Milton’s intellectual contribution to conceptions of press freedom, and formed the discussion of how the narrow conception of press freedom had emerged and developed in Britain (Steel, 2012; Eccleshall, 1986; Marchall, 1992). Unlike

its historical development in Britain (Danziger & Gliksman, 2004; Nagel, 2007), US and France, the conceptions of journalism and freedom of the press in China did not emerge by themselves, but were introduced externally. Although similar ideas can be traced back to ancient times in China, i.e. pre-Confucius times (before around 551–479 BC), it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that these Western concepts were introduced from the West into China as part of colonialism.

Confucianism is arguably a vital philosophical school that has influenced contemporary understandings of freedom of speech and freedom of the press in contemporary China. In order to examine these understandings from the perspective of online news workers and cyber police, it is necessary to provide an overview of the specific elements of Chinese history and culture that explicitly relate to how censorship practices are operationalised and experienced. In other words, the contemporary experience of censorship as identified in this thesis can only be adequately understood via a broader appreciation of the historically and culturally significant legacy of Confucianism. The assertions of historical and philosophical association between freedom of speech and freedom of the press, along with the mechanisms of controlling and suppression (Steel, 2012: p. 169) are also an assessment that this chapter aims to explore in the context of the Chinese news media, although the concept of freedom of speech and freedom of the press were imported and have had a considerably shorter life than in the West.

This chapter further outlines a turbulent development of how freedom of speech and freedom of the press were understood, respected, suppressed, or digested in China after it was introduced by early Chinese liberalists. Mao Zedong (1893–1976) had an enormous

influence over the construction of the news media in China, as his perspective of and attitude towards the roles of journalism shifted from a liberal viewpoint in his early times to one similar to that of the “Soviet Communist” model (Siebert *et al.*, 1956) after China’s Communist Party came to power around 1949.

Lastly, the historical and social context of online censorship is reviewed. The aim of analysing the background of online censorship is to provide this study with a political and historical context of China’s construction and modes of censorship. The discussion on the environment of free speech in China has become increasingly critical in recent years (Yang, 2003; Mackinnon, 2008). At the same time it has attracted public attention in China and instigated debates around the possibility of democratic reform (Hughes, 2003; Hutters, 2003). Such a discussion involves the nature and scope of free speech in China, the nature and scope of freedom amongst Chinese online news workers, how censorship manifests, and how the Chinese authorities censor people’s speech online.

This section also outlines examples of online censorship and online news media. In doing so it contextualises the blocking of foreign websites, the conflicts between Chinese authorities and foreign Internet firms, the rise of microblog as a form of news, and various historical and economic reasons for the existence of censorship, particularly within the liberal tradition of southern China’s media. In summary, the scope of this chapter is limited to China’s online news censorship, although it looks at the broader landscape of how the mechanisms of online news censorship are constructed. It also cites major incidents that have occurred since the authorities have sought to manage the control of the Internet.

## **3.2 Confucianism and its relationship to freedom of speech and freedom of the press in China**

### **3.2.1 The divine theory and channelisation theory in Pre-Confucian times**

Though no definitive conception of freedom of speech or expression emerges in Chinese political thought until the latter part of the nineteenth century from the First Opium War in 1839 (Hucker, 1975; Feuerwerker, Murphey & Wright, 1967; Hsü, 1971), Chinese ancient history does shed some important light on the significance of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled and the appropriate behaviour of both rulers and the ruled in respect to speech and expression. Both of these theories can be seen in terms of a debate concerning the subject's right to speak against the authority of the ruling elite without punitive sanction. In other words, both of these ideas signal attempts to reign in ruling power and ensure that dissent was managed effectively.

The notion of divine theory relates to the legitimacy and authority of the ruler over their subjects to control and discipline critics. Often those who spoke out against tyranny or unjust rule were harshly punished and sanctioned. For example, King Zhóu (? – c. 1046 BC) of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BC), portrayed as a heinous and debauched tyrant, sentenced to death those who dared to criticise his lavish and corrupt lifestyle. The principle of divine theory was an attempt by intellectuals to reign in the ultimate power of rulers by suggesting that punishing dissenters was an act of blasphemy and an insult to the gods (Sima, 1969). Crushing dissent or criticism was an insubordination of the principle of kind-heartedness and justice; and rulers who committed such acts might be condemned and punished by the gods which might also potentially result in their earthly



downfall. Ancient Chinese intellectuals therefore used this principle of divinity to constrain the absolute authority of the ruler and encourage kind-heartedness and justice. In contrast, the sagacious ruler knows how to take criticism and listen to advice from his people (Sima, 1969; Hsu, 1971)

The divine theory used the rulers' fear of their own downfall to prevent their suppression of the right to speak. However, it had two downsides. Firstly, the process of constraining the power of rulers was extremely time-consuming (Lu, 1933: p. 13). Secondly, the divine theory might only be effective if the ruler was either sagacious, ambitious, or at least sensible (Sima, 1969). A sagacious ruler would know the importance of taking advice and listening to criticism. An ambitious and sensible ruler might have a perspective of the overall situation and restrain himself for the sake of his own dominance. Principally, the practice of this theory was highly reliant on the personal judgement of imperial rulers to be effective. The hereditary feudal system could not guarantee that every king in a dynasty possessed the precious characteristics, such as sagaciousness, ambition, or sensibility (Lu, 1933: pp. 13, 14).

The channelling theory was another significant school of thought that intellectuals used to constrain the authority of the ruling class. The term of 'channellisation' was firstly used by Zhao-Hu (dates of birth and death unknown; c. 841 BC), a minister of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC) at the time of the Citizens' Riot in 841 BC, as he compared the right to speak with a form of natural phenomenon, by stating that banning people's speech was as dangerous as blocking the water of a flood (Lu., 1993), and he proclaimed that channelling people's resentment of the ruling class was a preferable solution for solving

political crisis, i.e. that rulers should grant people the right to criticise them, in order to assuage people's negative emotions, such as hatred and resentment, and to prevent the downfall of imperial governance.

Channelisation theory also seeks to emphasise certain limits to executive power. However, instead of attempting to set up a divine sanction for rulers who did not allow subjects a voice, this theory states that rather than prohibiting people from speaking out against unjust rule, people should be encouraged to 'channel' their energies in ways that can be managed by the authorities. In this way social stability, an important element of Chinese political culture could remain intact.

The channelling theory regarded the power of dictatorship as being superior to the right to speak, which could be limited by the will of a ruler. It granted that the ruler had the power to either allow or disallow people to criticise or give advice. The sole purpose of allowing the existence of criticism and the right to speak for people was to maintain the dominant status of the ruling class. Without questioning the irrationality of brutal censorship, it was therefore people's right to speak, regarded as the product of a ruler's benefaction (Schafer, 1951: pp. 133–8). Yet the channellisation theory failed to provide explicit guidelines, to demonstrate to the ruler how and where exactly these negative emotions could be channelled.

Traces of this sentiment can be seen in how gatekeepers and censors rationalise their activities. Arguably, this principle, also known as the mechanism of guiding public

opinion (Pan & Chan, 2005) or “... to eliminate instabilities” in order to maintain social stability (ibid., 2005; de Burgh, 2003), represents the core principle guiding censorship in online news media in China. The news is presented in a way by which the public opinion can be efficiently guided and channelled, favourable to the Chinese authorities. Lam even argued that this may be seen as a form of “heavy-handed manipulation of media” (2000: p. 37). The legacy of channellisation, which is also commonly seen in the production process of online news media, will be analysed in *Chapter 5: 5.3* and *Chapter 6: 4.2*.

### **3.2.2 Morality as the centre of Confucianism**

Before Confucianism was authorised by King Wu of Han (157–87 BC) as the only official philosophical thinking in 138 BC (Dubs, 1938: p. 435), historians had played a significant role in exercising channellisation theory. The historians were appointed directly by the imperial court. Their job was to record political activities and historical events and to present the emperor with the records of public criticisms of policies from the public (Sima, 1969). From the perspective of contemporary Chinese study and historical analysis, records produced by the historians became extremely important and critical, since the material was then edited and amended for the official historical record by the historians of the next dynasty. Historians were required to be extremely honest and professional as they were obliged to record truthfully and objectively (Sima, 1969). These characteristics of pre-Confucian figures have also had an influence on contemporary China, as Tong (2011) argued that contemporary journalists in China have inherited honesty and integrity from historical figures such as Bao Zheng (AD 999–1062) and Hai Rui (1514–1587) (Tong, 2011: pp. 18, 19). There is little evidence to suggest that these historians had an awareness of the concept of free speech, but as a group of intellectuals their obligation

was to record independently without interference from the authorities. The culture of historians required them to write the “objective truth” without fear or favour (Sima, 1969). A similar characteristic of professionalism is also pursued by contemporary Chinese journalists as they too praise the attempts of being honest and objective without interference by the authorities in reporting news stories (Tong, 2011), principles of most models of journalism worldwide.

The historians were also praised by Confucius (551–479 BC) because of their sense of morality, which was conceived by Confucius as reinforcing his theory of the right to speak. It was one of the crucial concepts that he advocated, a central point of Confucianism (Ivanhoe *et al.*, 2001). Confucius did not support constraining the power of feudal rulers by using their fear of downfall. Instead he focused on the solution of how rulers could be advised to restrain their power. He developed the notion of kind-heartedness and justice from the divine principle to suggest that a State should be ruled by a moral dominator who could be kind and just (De Bary, 1991). The moral dominator, as Confucius presumed, would know the importance of taking advice from others; his sense of morality would refrain him from punishing people who criticised him (Zhang & Schwartz, 1997: pp. 193–4). Confucius thus introduced his theoretical framework of morality, which consisted of his proposition of the right to speak, known as the ‘morality’ of Confucianism. In *Analects of Confucius* (2008), which was written by his pupils to record his statements and actions, Confucius interpreted his definition of morality as referring to *knowing* good and then *being* good; whereas immorality was either knowing good but being bad, or knowing bad, then *being* bad (Confucius, 2008).

Fairbank (1979) understood that in Confucian discourses, individuals are "... subservient to the State, personal duty is more important than individual rights" (Lee, 2005: p. 109). Confucius enrolled his pupils to spread his philosophy and political propositions. Confucianism—the Confucian doctrine—was defined as follows:

*Confucianism was but one philosophy among many, including Menciusm, Taoism and Legalism. To strengthen his power, Han Wudi (140–87 BC), emperor of the West Han Dynasty, followed the advice of the renowned scholar, Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BC), by rejecting all philosophies except Confucianism. Since then all feudal rulers have followed Confucianism and enforced it as a secular religion (Zhang & Schwartz, 1997: p. 193).*

As Confucius defined it, being good could be interpreted differently according to its subject. For a dominator, being good meant being kind to his people in the State. A moral dominator was capable of accepting reasonable criticisms (Confucius, 2008; Kim, 2003). This was the ideal "benevolent governance" (Zhang, 1999) to which Confucius referred. As he commented in *The Book of Songs* (Waley, 1937), a collection of folk poetry that he edited:

*... do not blame the speaker, take note of his warning; an exhortation to speak one's mind without fear of reprisals, and with the expectation of being taken seriously (Waley, 1937).*

On the other hand, for citizens, being good meant to be self-disciplined and not to criticise the ruling class. He commented, "When the way prevails in the realm, the common people do not debate politics among themselves" (Analects of Confucius, 2008: 16.2, *Li Shi*). The right to speak, from the perspective of Confucian morality, should not overrule the interests of the State or the power of the ruler. Critics of the rulers had to be self-disciplined to be moral, which meant that the interests of the State were the crucial criteria

to determine whether the critics were being moral or proper. If propositions of critics were consistent with the interests of the State, they were proper. However, if the propositions of critics were contradictory to the interests of the State, they were improper and critics should be silent. Hence, Confucius argued that ‘being good’ for citizens meant to “... not watch what is improper; do not listen to what is improper; do not speak improperly and do not act improperly” (Analects of Confucius, 2008: 12.2, *Yan Yuan*). Like the channellisation theory, Confucius also viewed the right to speak as a product of a ruler’s benefaction. Moral citizens were to know when to stop their participation in political discussions properly, as their permission to speak was granted by the authorities. This was what Confucius regarded as—I theorise—the limited freedom of the right to speak. In this manner, Confucius’ contributions were to define the notion of morality as a guideline of being good for both the rulers and the citizens, and brought forward his theory of limited freedom.

### **3.2.3 The Legacy of Confucius**

In essence, the core of Confucian ethics was being kind-hearted. Confucius incorporated kind-heartedness into the concept of morality and attempted to lecture rulers to respect human nature, and thus to forbid the right to speak would contradict his philosophy of morality (De Bary, 1991; Ivanhoe *et al.*, 2001; Crossley, 1992). His pursuit of kind-heartedness was discussed and reinterpreted by Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Although a rationalist and a Neo-Confucian, he nevertheless generated criticism of the right to individual freedom based on notions of man’s natural morality. It has been argued (Gardner, 2003; Ivanhoe, *et al.*, 2001; Dallmayr, 2002) that Zhu Xi believed human nature was derived from spirit and mind. Human nature could only be understood when it was rooted in the grounds of rational principles. In his memorial to the throne, he indicated

that the rational principle was the origin of man's nature. Being just therefore means the obeying of certain rational principles (Gardner, 2003). Human desires, for Zhu Xi, were unjust because having these desires disobeyed the rational principle. Therefore, he proclaimed that individual freedom should be restrained and controlled by the ruling class, and the freedom of the right to speak should be undermined.

Zhu Xi defined the meaning of 'rational principles' in many ways. He referred to the relationship between rational principles and human nature as the relationship between disciplinary virtue and greed (De Bary, 1991). Zhu Xi considered slander, spreading of rumour, and irrational verbal attacks as irresponsible speech (De Bary, 1991, Makeham, 2003). He suggested that the rulers of the State had to exercise their political power to censor and discipline the irresponsible speech before it brought harm to the interests of the State. Furthermore, Zhu unduly praised this notion to a virtual level and suggested that the imperial rulers restricted the public from participating in political and social discussions because he believed the common people knew little regarding what would benefit the interests of the State (Gardner, 2003) and their autonomy was unreliable. As a result, his morality was interpreted as a theory of a more limited freedom of the right to speak and individual freedom, which theoretically underpinned the literary inquisition, a form of accusation for people who were condemned for their speech crimes in feudal China.

Zhu Xi's proposition of censorship thus offered the feudal rulers the ideological support for literary inquisition and centralisation, which were mainly used to persecute scholars whose criticisms offended the highest imperial ruler before his time. For example, Yang

Yun (?–54 BC), a general of the Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220), was executed because he had mocked an agricultural policy in his essay, a letter to Sun Huizong. The musician and poet Xi Kang (223–263) was executed because he had questioned the validity of the dictatorship of Emperor Wen (211–265) in public, and Su Shi (1037–1101), a statesman and a poet of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), was banished twice as he repeatedly criticised the reformation of the highest ruler. After Zhu Xi, the scope of literary inquisition was expanded, especially in the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). The Qing rulers were notorious for their use of literary inquisitions, as not only scholars or critics suffered but the more common people were also victims. For instance, in a single “case of the history of the Ming Dynasty” between 1661 and 1662, “no less than a thousand” people were killed or exiled, based on unwarranted charges of being offensive to the imperial court (Wong, 2000).

The reason for reviewing the historical and conceptual development of Confucius and his successors is that the only authorised philosophical thinking in feudal China—Confucianism and its manifest of limited freedom—still heavily influence the way in which censorship is understood and experienced in the news media in China today. It has been argued that Confucianism had an enormous impact on the early Chinese press from 1919 to 1949, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (Levenson, 1962; Lee, 2005; Passin, 1963). The early Chinese press was “... strongly modernizing, opposing the forces and ideologies based on Confucianism and tradition” (Passin, 1963). And yet, anti-traditional reformists of the media operated “... within the framework of Confucianism and rebelled against it” (Lee, 2005, p. 109). Although Confucianism began to lose its position, unchallenged since the decay of the Qing dynasty in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had to compete with other social doctrines of Western thought, it still influenced the



formation of Chinese philosophical thinking and Chinese news media to a great extent. For example, Fairbank (1979) called ‘Maoism’ “... Confucianism in Leninist garb”, as both Maoism and Leninism “... stress the pivotal role of ideology” and “... share the elitist and statist orientations”, while the former was developed and rooted in a Confucian tradition in China (Lee, 2005, p. 110). Based on the strongly retained ideology of Confucian legacies, Mao declared, “Politics takes command of the press” and the press and communist journalists were democratically centralised, i.e. the media was to be commanded by the Chinese authorities to “... create social impact closely related to the grand ideology and political lines” (Lee, 2005, p. 110).

Hence, the contemporary administrative structure of the news media in China found their theoretic basis in the limited freedom and morality of Confucianism. For instance, during the Cultural Revolution (1967–77) which de Burgh (2003) called the “destruction of journalism”, Chinese journalism was understood as a tool for the purpose of maintaining uniformity in public opinion and propagandising the image of the communist leaders. News stories that were unfavourable to the Chinese authorities, such as criticism of the government or its policies, were strictly prohibited. Arguably, this form of administrative intervention was gradually changed, and the emergence of massive critical reports on social problems and government policies from the news media were approved (Tong, 2012: pp. 35–48). But the philosophical thinking of the freedom of people/citizens is that the benefaction of the authorities can be given and taken, and remains intact. The limited freedom is, therefore, suitable for underpinning media censorship which the later analysis *Chapter 7:3.1 & 3.2* will explore.

## **3.3 Maoism, media control and propaganda before online news in China**

### **3.3.1 The May 4th Movement: introducing free speech and freedom of the press to China**

With the reinforcement of the imperial rulers, people's right to speak was restricted, although Confucianism proposed limited freedom within it. The concept of the right to speak in ancient China was derived from morality. Chinese scholar-bureaucrats did not extend the scope of the right to speak into law. Up to the point when literary inquisition caused social instability in the Qing dynasty, the utopianism that restrained the feudal powers from violating the right to speak was considered a failure (Hucker, 1975). Before a comprehensive concept of freedom of speech and freedom of the press was introduced to China after the First Opium War in 1839, freedom of speech had never been considered at a legislative level in China.

After the First Opium War, the works of Western philosophers were translated into Chinese, and with them the concepts of free speech and freedom of press. Translators who specialised in translating Western books into Chinese emerged during the period when knowledge of foreign languages was extremely low. Translators therefore became crucial to the introduction of the concepts of free speech and freedom of the press to China. For example, Yan Fu (1854–1921) translated J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* and Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (Yan, 2004), the latter considered to have made an enormous contribution to civil education and enlightenment in the modern history of China (Schwartz, 2009). Yan Fu interpreted J. S. Mill based on his own understanding and developed his theory of human nature. Human nature, for Yan Fu, consisted of

freedom of speech and of choice, where concepts of public and private become evident; a man should not be punished if he only spoke in private, despite the fact that his speech might be offensive to the governors. Based on this theory, he directly criticised the literary inquisition, as the inquisition and the philosophy that stood against the freedoms of speech and of choice (Schwartz, 2009).

Radical criticism of Confucianism began from the May Fourth Movement in 1919 (Schwartz, 1986). The movement was seen as a volcanic eruption in China, as many Western schools of thought were rapidly introduced. It was seen as China's own enlightenment movement (Feuerwerker, Murphy & Wright, 1967; Schwartz, 1986). Lu Xun (1881–1936) analogised censorship of the press to the chains of cultured persecution, and proposed that people should be free to participate in political discussions in a public area without fear of being punished or persecuted (Lu, 1933). Confucian limited freedom of the right to speak was sharply criticised as “fake freedom”, as Lu argued that the limited freedom theory and Confucian morality gave people “fake hope”, and deluded them into thinking that they could have freedom of speech that could never be redeemed (1933: p. 36).

Lu (1933) believed that the Chinese people's freedom of speech should not be a product of the ruler's benefaction, and defined it as a just and fair freedom for every human being, regardless of class. Freedom of speech should not be given or be permitted by anyone. On the contrary, this freedom was within the notion of human nature, i.e. people were born to have freedom of speech and the limits of freedom should not be limited by the will of the government (Lu, 1933: pp. 37–8).

As a result of the May Fourth Movement and other subsequent social movements, freedom of speech was recognised as a fundamental right and eventually was written into law for the first time in the history of China. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) promulgated in 1947, (Chapter II, Article 11) states: "The people shall have freedom of speech, teaching, writing and publication." Similarly, Article 35 of the Constitution of the PRC (promulgated in 1949) also states: "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration." However, despite the fact that freedom of speech and freedom of the press were legitimated in China, the full realisation of both has been limited in practice.

### **3.3.2 The Communist Party's criticism and self-criticism in journalism**

The understanding of free speech and freedom of the press in China were treated differently in the periods of Mao and post-Mao, and the understandings and practices of freedom of the press resulted in different social impacts. These developments and shifts were socially driven and reflected the development of the news industry in China. This is not to classify Mao as a simple individual who had enormous influence in contemporary China. Rather, he was seen as a representative figure of communism in China who came to signify the era which witnessed the development of the Chinese news industry (Dirlik, 1978). The waves of Maoism and his interpretations of communism also influenced the structure and mechanisms of Chinese news media and, later, the online news media.

It is worth noting that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has traditions of what Mao advocated as “criticism and self-criticism” (Mao, 1964). It was interpreted as an embracing gesture for media supervision, of controlling and disciplining Party cadres (Tong, 2011: p. 23). There was a period of time during which criticism and self-criticism were both welcomed. Journalists were encouraged to report, criticise, and investigate social crises, injustice, and unfairness on behalf of the underprivileged class. Thus, criticism and self-criticism were tools used by the Communist Party for purification, which was defined by Mao (1964) as a political reformatory process of educating the Party members’ mindset and creating strong believers in communism.

After becoming one of the main leaders of the CCP, Mao regarded freedom of speech as a powerful weapon for communistic revolution. In *The United Government* (1951), he quoted the ancient philosopher Su Xun (1009–1066) who had spoken of “... saying all that you know and saying it without any reserve” (Mao, 1951, p. 1096) to stress his political view. He believed that in political discussions it was always a better scenario to have an open and free public sphere rather than a closed and censored one, as he claimed that only the people’s participation in political discussion without fear could assist the prospect of democracy and liberalism in China. He also criticised Confucianism thought by referring to its doctrine as only looking at the self-regulation and self-governance in terms of morality. Confucianism, as Mao objected, was concerned with the morality of being good for the governors and ruling class, but underrated the power of autonomy and freedom. If a governor believed in Confucius and ignored the autonomy and freedom that people should have, he was being neither moral nor politically just. Therefore, Mao recommended criticism and self-criticism, which he later specified as “media supervision of the governance” and contributed to investigative journalism (Tong, 2011: pp. 23–4).

This is principally a reflection of what Steel (2009) regarded as “prioritizing the interests” in respect of the capitalist market:

*Journalism can be seen as reflecting particular values that prioritize the interests of those who have the most to gain from the market of news production and dissemination (Steel, 2009: p. 583).*

It was at that time that the press in China functioned in a “top down” manner (Siebert *et al.*, 1956, p. 2), typically constructed in a way that Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) understood within their authoritarian category of the press. A few men who possessed power were to be the centre of decision-making in the media, and the products of mass communication were to serve the rulers. Hence, it was not surprising that Mao’s original political propositions were shifted after the Communist Party obtained political power, as the dominant status of the Party became the interest that needed to be prioritised. Although Mao was a supporter of establishing a liberal society in China in his early years, he changed his views on freedom of speech and freedom of the press after he became the leader of the PRC. The process of this shift of political propositions might even have occurred earlier than that. In his conference report, *Opposing Liberalism* in 1937, he criticised the over-emphasised concept of individual freedom which had negative effects on China’s Communist Party. Some comrades appeared to disobey the Party and its orders (Mao, 1951). He described liberal thought as a corrosive agent that could corrupt the solidarity of communist comradeship. If his comrades were to care more about the pursuit of personal values than achieving communist values, it would harm the Party’s collective will and its organisation.

Mao was later described as a dictator rather than a liberal, as he censored and disciplined people who criticised communism and government policies (Patten, 2005). In 1966, he launched the Cultural Revolution, a ten-year social movement that was full of literary inquisitions and abuses of liberty (Bridgham, 1967; Deng & Treiman, 1997). During the time of the Cultural Revolution, journalists were obliged to serve the interests of the CCP as part of its propaganda mechanism, rather than journalistic practices. The purpose of propaganda served to emphasise that the class struggle and proletarian revolution were the most important tasks for the whole country, from journalists, politicians, workers, even to school pupils. Press freedom was overlooked or devalued, and as de Burgh (2003, p19) notes, the Cultural Revolution brought about the destruction of journalism as we understand it.

During the Cultural Revolution, often the authorities could charge an individual by assuming that his thinking or behaviour might be harmful to others or to the “highest ideality of communism” (Han, 2006), which principally would equal the interests of the authorities. In order to uphold the best interests of the majority, any individual who might have been “... corrupted by the capitalism and imperialism” (Mao, 1964: Chaps. 11 & 13) had committed crime in thought. These judgements of crime were often made by a group of frenetic people who had little knowledge of human rights (Angle, 2002; Kent, 1993), law, and free speech, and not by a court in a country with an adequate legal system. They were, in this sense, another form of literary inquisition under the name of the highest ideals of communism (Deng & Treiman, 1997; Tsou, 1969). The suspects who were considered as anti-revolutionists would suffer public humiliation in the street and physical abuse. The Cultural Revolution encouraged self-censorship and cross-surveillance, and created a consciousness of class struggle among civilians. It destroyed trust between

friends, family members, and colleagues. Freedom of the press was then strictly limited and the news media barely engaged in political discussions (Deng & Treiman, 1997; de Burgh, 2003).

The fear of saying anything but ‘Long live the leader!’ and singing praise for the doctrine of communism is basically mirrored by today’s North Korea, where the professional journalists have little room to practise journalism, and the voice of the press is isolated and stereotyped. The study of this typical communist form of propaganda can be traced back to the 1930s, when the Soviet Union used it to remove the profit motive from publishing and broadcasting, and integrated mass communication “... into the total communication system and into the total government” (Siebert *et al.*, 1956: pp. 140–1).

However, this study does not intend to pursue too much detail about how Stalinists operated the propaganda machine. The purpose of bringing the propaganda studies of the Soviet Union into the picture is to provide a reference point for the form or manifestation of the communist propaganda that the Chinese journalists—more precisely, Chinese propagandists—used for similar goals of serving the ideals of communism as the interests of the authorities.

China had imitated the constitution of its communist neighbour, the USSR, before the Soviet Union broke apart in 1989. This included a large scale of institutional forms of government departments. The institutional influence of the Soviet Union also expanded to cultural and media levels, as some may argue this influence is still strong today



(Lindtner & Szablewicz, 2010; Chang, 2001). The Party's infiltration of the online news media is arguably a significant legacy of journalism in the class-struggle period before 1977, when the Party members who represented the proletariat had to rule the mouthpiece. This infiltration resulted in "a sterile uniformity of Mao worship and political formulae" as de Burgh (2003, p. 60) described it.

Chinese society experienced a dramatic transformation after 1977, when Mao's death led to a dramatic change in journalism in China. Along with the reform of the economy, the press was reformed in a way in which saw previously taboo subjects, such as "natural disasters, riots or resistance to Chinese rule by the Turks or Tibetans" (de Burgh, 2003: p. 66) be reported. In 1989, plans to separate the Party from the civil service were initiated (de Burgh, 2003: p. 66). In *Chapter 8: 8.2.1* and *8.4*, I argued that exfoliation of the Party and the government in China leads to loopholes in censorship regulation, which online news workers can use to negotiate and leverage with the authorities over online content.

### **3.3.3 Propaganda in Communist China: nationalism and salvation in journalism**

It is worth noting that neither in journalistic nor political terms has 'propaganda' had negative connotations among communists (Jowett & o'Donnell, 2014). Because, "Communism is said to provide an objective and scientific understanding of the world, little distinction is made between propaganda and education" (Clark, 1997: p. 73; Hardt, 1979). Evidently, nationalistic salvation has been adopted by China's Communist Party as one of the key concepts in its strategy of propaganda since the beginning of its establishment in the early 1920s. Mao extracted the proposition of proletarian revolution,

and then integrated it with nationalism and salvation (Chang, 2001; Han, 2006). Throughout the history of the Sino-Japan wars (1931-1945), and the Third Domestic War (1946–49), and following the official establishment of the PRC in 1949, China's Communist Party consistently portrayed itself as the representative of the proletariat and as the saviour of the Chinese as a whole nation (Chang, 2001).

From a historical perspective, declaring the Communist Party or the nation's saviour was a timely strategy that did indeed earn the support of the masses in the 1920s in China, as nationalistic awareness was on the rise (Feuerwerker, Murphy, & Wright, 1967). China experienced political instability and turbulent times when the central government became weak, while the military power of warlords in different regions was growing stronger (Grieder, 1981). China's working class and middle class intellectuals, who harboured resentment of the central government, found sympathy with the CCP, which declared itself as being the liberator and vindicator of the nation (Chang, 2001). This propaganda of the idealised identity had been the core of the strategy of the Communist Party throughout its history and it further influenced the Party's censorship mechanism of journalism and the news media. For example, slogans such as "Communist Party is the great savior of Chinese people" (Wu, 2010) and "No Communist Party, no new China" were broadcast widely via radio, newspapers, and booklets in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chen, 2014). These slogans, which were embedded in lyrics to assist their popularity among the working class and peasants, represent a symbolic statement that nationalism and national salvation were associated with the identity of the CCP. Before Mao died in 1976, propaganda also linked the *idea* of loyalty to the nation with a personality cult of Mao (Chen, 2014). As Lam (2000) argued, this strategy was formed during the war time and was established by Mao himself:

*'Power grows out of the barrel of a gun,' said Chairman Mao Zedong on the success of the Communist Revolution. Yet it is equally accurate to say that power grows out of, and is sustained by, the nib of a pen. Propaganda, through the heavy-handed manipulation of the media, has been just as essential as the army and police in upholding the mandate of heaven of the CCP (Lam, 2000, p. 37).*

The role and function of Chinese journalism, under these circumstances, were required to maintain the uniformity of Chinese society (Lam, 2000, p. 37), rather than promoting other values. The doctrines of the Communist Party as the Chinese saviour and the personality cult of Mao have been weakened in today's news media in China, but a similar philosophical thinking remains. The worship of Mao and the 'saviour' identity of the Chinese nation have been transferred to the concept of harmonisation for political and social stability, which is also considered as the higher purpose of constructing the society and maintaining political stability.

Perhaps the theory that best describes journalism and freedom of the press in China during this period has to go back to the Soviet communism about which Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) theorised. Both were derived from Marxism, and Chinese journalism shares compelling similarities with its communist neighbour, e.g. 1) led by the power of organisation of the proletariat; 2) the mass submitted to the dictatorship of the parties; 3) mass communication was used instrumentally and integrated with other instruments of State power (with publicity departments of the Communist Party in China's case); 4) freedom of speech and the press were constitutionalised and written into law, but the freedom to act against the State cannot be permitted (Siebert *et al.*, 1956).

## **3.4 Social background of online censorship in China**

### **3.4.1 The Great Firewall and online Censorship**

This research seeks to establish a blueprint of online censorship in China. It includes five different levels of online censorship, from top to bottom, they are: technological means of Internet surveillance, government-based public security monitoring, administrative gatekeeping in the online news media, editorial self-censorship and self-censorship of journalistic practice. The lowest three levels refer to the activities that happen in the online newsroom, whereas the top two levels emanate directly from the practices and structures of the Chinese authorities. This section focuses on reviewing the establishment and development of the first level of this revised-pyramid, and criticisms of them (see figure 1 in *Chapter 1: 2.5*).

The top two levels of the inverted pyramid of online censorship are operationalised automatically or manually, or a combination of both, via the use of specific technologies. The technologies used in this process will be discussed in this chapter. More specifically this chapter will detail the automated mechanisms of censorship, also known as the Great Firewall and Green Dam. The Great Firewall effectively filters content via scripts and code algorithms, while Green Dam blocks content and provides surveillance through the pre-installation of software on personal computers (Bristow, 2009).

### 3.4.1.1 The Great Firewall

As figure 1 (*Chapter 1: 2.5*) demonstrates, the Great Firewall is the first level of online censorship which is essentially technological. Although the use of the technology of the firewall may seem to be remote from online news workers' journalistic practice, their daily routines are heavily influenced by their knowledge of the existence of these nationwide monitoring and filtering technologies. A significant inconvenience that the Great Firewall causes is that it disables Chinese online news workers' access to foreign websites, such as BBC and Twitter. The blocking of foreign news websites and microblogs therefore limits the news feeds in China (Zhang, 2006; Smith, 2002). Chinese online news workers normally cannot access these news feeds for reporting international news stories, unless they use proxy virtual private network (VPN) to bypass the firewall. The act of bypassing the Great Firewall is known as "climbing over the wall" (*Fan Qiang*, in Mandarin.) In this sense, to study the censorship of online news, it is impossible to overlook the Great Firewall, as the filtering project has impeded the process of online news production in China.

The Great Firewall is operated by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) of China. It was first launched in 1998, also known as China's national firewall (Global Times, 2011; Xiao, 2010). The firewall project was adopted by the Chinese government for the purpose of controlling online content, and monitoring the Internet browsing of ordinary Internet users in China (Zittrain & Edelman p.70-71; Clayton, Murdoch, & Watson, 2006). The Great Firewall was developed to block domestic users' access to foreign websites that contained 'sensitive' information, such as anti-communist or obscene content (Zittrain, & Edelman, 2003:70). It also filters domestic website content and has the technical

capacity to switch off servers if they are found to be hosting “sensitive” political or obscene content (Zittrain, & Edelman, 2003: 70-1).

The Great Firewall’s filtering mechanism is understood by Crandall (2007) as not only a firewall, but also “a Panopticon” where the presence of censorship promotes self-censorship (Crandall, *et al.*, 2007; Jansen, 1991). The Panopticon was firstly designed by Bentham late 18th century as a form of institutional prison that allows surveillance of inmates. Bentham argued that it was an effective design for a constant controlling of inmates’ behaviour, as inmates know they may be watched but are never sure of when (Bentham, 2011). Later, Foucault (1995) invoked the design of the Panopticon and developed it as a metaphor for modern disciplinary societies and “social quarantine” (Foucault, 1995, p.216). Foucault argued that not only prisons but hierarchical structures of society had evolved to resemble Bentham’s Panopticon, thus creating a consciousness of visibility as a form of power for surveillance and domination (Allmer, 2012). Building on Bentham’s Panopticon and Foucault’s Panopticism, scholars applied the theory to the technological context. Zuboff (1988) provides portrayals of the use of computer technology that created an information Panopticon in surveillance, and Brignall (2002) has argued that the Internet allowed for a panoptic form of observation for social control. In this sense, the Great Firewall is a significant example of an information Panopticon where computer technology is used for the purpose of online content control.

In recent years, the name of the Great Firewall appeared in a number of news items which involved the conflicts between the Chinese government and foreign Internet companies. In 2009, the Chinese government accused Google.cn of not filtering sensitive information properly, as a number of obscene pictures and texts could be searched via its search engine (Chen, 2009a; Chen, 2009b). The searching function via Google.cn search sites was

subsequently closed down in 2010 (Helft & Barboza, 2010; Independent, 2010). Other examples include foreign news media. The Chinese versions of BBC News and Voice of America were banned in China in 2008 (BBC, 2008b). Both of them were accused of asserting the concept of ‘two Chinas’, which referred to mainland China and Taiwan as two independent regions (BBC, 2008b). Foreign websites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter were also restricted or banned, as they allowed users to edit and update text, audio and video content which were out of reach of Chinese government interference (Branigan, 2009). Users in China found the links to YouTube, Facebook and Twitter were directed to a ‘server error’ page.

#### **3.4.1.2 The Green Dam pre-installment filtering software**

Green Dam Youth Escort, shortened to Green Dam, is a content-control software developed by Zhengzhou Jinhui Computer System Engineering Ltd. with input from Beijing Dazheng Human Language Technology Academy Ltd (Zhang, 2009). A directive from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China (MIIT) in 2009 originally took effect on 1st July, after which every new computer in China would have the software pre-installed. It was reported (Zhang, 2009; Bristow, 2009) that the newest version of the software had to be pre-installed on new Chinese-made computers, and imported computers must contain the software before they were sold. According to Foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang, the software filters out obscene or violent materials to promote the healthy development of the Internet (Bristow, 2009; Watt, 2009a; Watt, 2009b).

However, at the end of June 2009, the requirement of mandatory pre-installation was delayed when some computer producers postponed the plan (Fang, 2009; McDonald, 2009). In August, Li Yizhong, the minister of MIIT, announced that it was no longer obligatory for computer manufacturers and retailers to install the software on new computers for home or business use, because a number of personal computer manufacturers refused to comply with this regulation and pre-install the software on the computers sold on the Chinese market (BBC Chinese, 2009a; Li, C. 2009). Eventually, state owned media announced that the Green Dam would instead be an optional package (Watt, 2009).

The software has received strong criticism since it was developed. The criticism focused on three aspects: the legality of coercive installation, query of the project's cost (417 million RMB) and, most importantly, query of its functional defects and security vulnerabilities. The design of Green Dam was criticised on a number of levels, for instance, the software is only capable of recognising pictures of nudity featuring "yellow-skinned" characters (Hu & Guo 2009). Reports also criticised that pictures and words can be misrecognised (Southern Metropolis Weekly, 2009), and word editing applications may be forced to close without notifying the user and therefore cause data loss, if so-called "inappropriate content" is identified (Hu & Guo 2009). The software runs only on Microsoft Windows x86 and is compatible only with Internet Explorer and Google Chrome browsers (Fildes, 2009), and tests showed potential faults in the software could lead to a large-scale disaster as it has "a series of software flaws" (Fildes, 2009). Other issues included that the software was easy to be hacked (Netease, 2009) and its executables loaded on the start-up part cannot be removed by its own uninstaller. This means personal computer users have no administrator access to uninstall the software. Furthermore, in spite of the main aim that MIIT declared, namely filtering out



pornographic or violent material, tests have shown that the software filter contains about 85% political keywords, and only 15% pornography-related keywords (Southern Metropolis Weekly, 2009). These figures indicate that the purpose of implanting this pre-installed software might be politically motivated rather than to protect young people, as the MIIT claimed.

Before it was abandoned, free speech campaigners were concerned that the software could be used to spy on users' profiles and Internet habits on behalf of the government. Professor Jonathan Zittrain of Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society is worried that the government-mandated software installed on each machine could significantly damage the free speech environment (Fildes, 2009). Isaac Mao, a blogger and social entrepreneur in China, also a research fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center, believed that there was a new guideline from the country's central propaganda department "to comb all media and online forums to block critics and discussion over the issue" (Fildes, 2009).

Chinese users mocked Green Dam as an IT joke. The polls conducted on leading websites, such as Sina, Netease, Tencent, and Sohu, showed that over 80% of people refused the installation (Gao, 2009). Li Fangping, a lawyer, indicated that the software was a "concealed attempt by the government to expand censorship" (Jacobs, 2009a). People's attitude to the Green Dam was sarcastic. Moreover, users created a cartoon version of the so-called "Green Dam Girl". The figure is often depicted as a young girl in green web police dress (BBC, 2009; Koman, 2009; Goldkorn, J. 2009).

Although the Green Dam project was a failure with flaws and loopholes in its design, the proposal to launch it by the MIIT signalled that the government was attempting to expand the range of information control and content filtering from the Internet to private devices. We already know that Internet users who search ‘sensitive’ words in news websites and search engines may find their access limited due to the filtering of the Great Firewall. But the limitation can only apply when the users connect their devices online. Offline activities on a computer or a smart phone cannot be monitored by the Great Firewall. The conception of Green Dam intends to plant the filtering and blocking into private devices, as both news workers and ordinary Internet users are under surveillance as long as they use these electronic devices (Qin, 2014; Bristow, 2009). In this sense, it is a more aggressive method of censorship and invasion of privacy than the Great Firewall and the cyber police that will be discussed in the next chapter.

This study does not discuss further details of the design flaws in the Green Dam, nor does it argue the issues of abuse of public resources and corruption of the government. As such, the mindset of having administrative interference over the online content is identical with what was observed in online news production (See details in *Chapter 5:4* and *Chapter 6:4.1 & 4.3*). The technological means used by Green Dam, such as key word filtering and sensitive word censoring, are also broadly used by the cyber police (*Chapter 5:5.1*) and they comment as monitors of online news and delete user-generated content as routine (*Chapter 6:4.2*). As such the criteria of control remain but have been implemented by humans instead of technologies.

### **3.4.2 The Internet in China in 2008**

The year 2008 was significant for Internet censorship in China, as it was the year that the Chinese authorities’ attitude toward the censorship of news changed and they

demonstrated a friendly gesture to foreign websites which used to be banned. During the Beijing Olympic Games, foreign news websites such as BBC became accessible, but soon after the Olympics finished, these websites were again blocked (BBC, 2008b). Beijing had promised to improve the environment of freedom of speech and the free press during the bidding process for the Olympics in 2001 as Wang Wei, the secretary general of the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee stated:

*“We will give the (foreign) media complete freedom to report when they come to China [...] We are confident that the Games coming to China not only promotes our economy but also enhances all social conditions, including education, health and human rights” (Amnesty International, 2008).*

The lifting of the ban on foreign websites benefited both foreign and domestic news workers. The Chinese news workers in the Olympic Media Center also gained free access to foreign websites without the assistance of proxy VPNs (Spencer, 2008; Branigan, 2008).

This section takes a look back on Internet censorship issues in 2008 in three parts. The first part mainly introduces a brief background of China’s pledge to allow open media access, and lift the controversial bans on foreign websites before and during the Games. The second part, reviews criticisms of censorship on the Internet from both the domestic and foreign media. The government’s response to these criticisms and the lifting of bans on foreign websites are also reviewed. Lastly, it reviews the period after the Games, when the limited freedom of Internet access was fading away as unblocked websites were re-banned again. The discussions on this and following sections about Google China’s dispute with the Chinese government and Weibo and high profile scandals together set out the precursors to the current environment on the Internet.

### **3.4.2.1 Website bans**

In 2002, China was criticised for expanding its secret team of informers and hackers who spied on users on the Internet (BBC Chinese, 2002). Statistics show that the population of Internet users in China was about 33 million in 2002 (BBC Chinese, 2002). The number sharply increased to 100 million in 2006 (BBC Chinese, 2005). However, the population growth of Internet users did not also bring openness on the Internet. Criticisms of the Chinese government censoring the Internet increased. In 2006, Internet giants, such as Microsoft, Yahoo, and Google, were criticised by the British Parliament and U.S. Congress for the compromises they made to the Chinese government (BBC Chinese, 2006a). These corporations were accused of censoring their own search engines in order to enter the Chinese market. The consequence of such censorship was that Chinese Internet users could not search and access certain information that the Chinese government considered sensitive (BBC Chinese, 2006b; BBC Chinese, 2006a).

### **3.4.2.2 Debates on portal restriction**

The crucial standpoint that justifies Internet censorship for the Chinese government is that the Communist Party believes some content on the Internet can pose a threat to the stability of Chinese society. Such content, the Party objects, contains information about anti-Communism, hostility to Communism and China, incitement to overthrowing the regime, pornography, violence, Tiananmen Square protests, discussion of democratic systems, parades, and the independence of Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, or Hong Kong, which may harm the solidarity and harmony of society. Therefore, as the government persists,

the Internet needs to be censored, and websites with sensitive information need to be banned.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2006, Liu Zhengrong, Deputy Director of Information Office of the State Council, explained the prohibition on foreign websites. The reason that foreign websites were banned was they were judged to violate certain law articles of PRC. According to his clarification, some foreign websites contain elements which may be considered as “pornographic, obscene, or horrific”. As such it was “necessary and understandable” that censorship was imposed (Zhu, 2006). Furthermore, he added, the censoring procedures were transparent and the communication between Chinese users and the rest of the world was fluent. He indicated that the Chinese government had no intention to make enemies with foreign political parties or websites (Zhu, 2006).

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, 2006, Cai Wu, Director of Ministry of Culture, former Director of Information Office, said Chinese websites offer “probably the freest forum for opinion in the world” (Radio Free Asia, 2006).

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, 2009, Qing Gang, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, refused to confirm that YouTube had been re-blocked. He commented that the “Chinese government does not feel afraid of the Internet” (Government of PRC, 2009; RFI, 2009; BBC Chinese, 2008c; BBC Chinese, 2009b). After the conference, YouTube appeared to be accessible for a few days, but was blocked again on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 2009, in answering questions about the ban on Free Asia Radio, Qing Gang said that “the radio station that had been mentioned is consistently interfering in

China's internal affairs" (Ji, 2009). According to the report by Radio Taiwan International, a BBC journalist asked whether the ban on BBC was for the same reason, and Qing indicated that he had no knowledge of this situation. However, he implied that situations could be different, "otherwise, it could be serious" (Ji, 2009).

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, 2009, a commentary on China Daily from the Chinese People's Liberation Army wrote that Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, and YouTube could be used by "Western hostile forces" (Chi, 2009) as propaganda tools. Moreover, it called for progressing the technique of network isolation, shielding, locking and countering online attacks (Chi, 2009; Sina News, 2009).

The ban on certain websites along with the censorship of the Internet was criticised widely. Reporters Without Borders ranked China 167 out of 173 in its Press Freedom Index in 2008 (RWB, 2008). Furthermore, due to the lack of public commitment to press freedom by the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee (BOGBC), Reporters Without Borders and other NGOs called for a boycott of the Olympics (Engdahl, 2010; Swiss Info., 2008).

In 2001, Wang Wei, Secretary General of the BOGBC, had confirmed that China would offer "complete freedom" (Hai, 2008) to the media. According to a report, it was intending to relax control of the Internet during the Olympics. The Committee planned to tear down the Great Firewall and allow access to banned websites such as the BBC (AFP, 2008).

The lifting of bans started on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2008. The BBC's English web page was the first to be unblocked (BBC, 2008b). At the beginning of July, one after the other, Yahoo Hong Kong, Sing Tao Daily, Ming Bao, Central News Agency, The Hong Kong Jockey Club, Taiwan Television Broadcasts Satellite, Eastern Broadcasting, the Chinese web page of America Online, China Times, World Journal, Asia Times Online, Google Blogger and Flickr were unblocked. However, international journalists from the Beijing Olympic press centre complained about the transparency of unblocking. Web pages that contained information about Free Tibet, Tiananmen Square protests, and Falun Gong were still banned (BBC Chinese, 2008b; Central News Agency, 2008).

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, Kevan Gosper, the press commission head of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), admitted that he had broken the promise of uncensored Internet access which he had made in early April, and he suspected that the IOC leadership probably knew that certain websites were blocked (MSN News Services, 2008; Batty, 2008). In the afternoon, more websites were unblocked, including the Chinese web page of Wikipedia, Apple Daily of Hong Kong, Taiwan Liberty Times, the Chinese page of BBC, Deutsche Welle, Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders (Bristow, 2008).

The Government's act of lifting the ban on websites was embraced by foreign media. Xiao Yang, a commentator on Deutsche Welle, wrote that it would be a big step forward for the Chinese government over censorship (Xiao, 2008). Sealing Internet access could not block people from knowing about the outside world forever (Xiao, 2008). Xiao Yang advised that the liberalisation of the Internet should continue after the Games.

However, the liberalisation did not last. A few months after the Games, the government started banning websites again. By December 2012, Deutsche Welle, BBC, VOA, Reporters Without Borders, Ming Bao, Asia Weekly, Radio France Internationale, ABC Radio Australia, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation were re-blocked (Chen, 2008). Liu Jianchao, the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, indicated that overall, China's Internet policy was open, however, that the websites which had been banned must have violated Chinese law (BBC Chinese, 2008a). Chen Su, a VOA journalist, believed that re-blocking was conducted for economic reasons. The commentator suspected that the Chinese government used its authority of censorship to control the Internet media again in order to relieve its financial stress in a period of economic crisis (Chen, 2008).

To sum up, due to the promise that had been made, the Chinese authorities temporarily stopped the blocking of foreign websites and loosened its control of the Internet. But soon after the Olympics finished and the foreign news workers left, the Internet control was tightened and a number of foreign websites were re-banned.

The reason for reviewing the narrative of change and temporary freedom in 2008 is because, firstly, the renewed blow to press freedom essentially confirms that the Confucianism philosophy of limited freedom is still influential. That is, in the current social context in China, freedom for the people is a benefaction of the rulers/authorities, and this freedom can be compromised for the welfare of the state, the government, or the Communist Party. Throughout the whole year of 2008, the Chinese authorities had made a gesture of decontrolling the Internet to some extent, but this decontrolling was only a benefaction of the authorities as this 'limited freedom' was reversible.



Secondly, the act of re-banning demonstrates the control of the Chinese government over the Internet. Re-tightening Internet control, re-blocking foreign websites, and re-disallowing news workers' access to foreign websites did not cause significant resistance in China itself. Online news workers, who in principle should be one of the most affected groups of Internet users, remained quiet and submissive about the loss of their 'limited freedom', as few criticisms against this process were made within online news organisations.

### **3.4.3 Google China's dispute with the Chinese government**

The aim of reviewing the dispute between Google and the Chinese government is firstly, to provide a background of why and how Google was restricted in China despite the fact it is the one of the largest search engines in the world. For online news workers, the consequence of losing access to Google's search engine deprives them of a useful database and access to international news feeds and proxy VPNs for the purpose of bypassing the Great Firewall. Secondly, this section aims to compare the efficiency and results of administrative interference from the authorities in the online news media. For domestic websites, the Chinese authorities can give instructions and directives to interfere with the protocol of online news production, as the domestic websites are principally managed by the authorities. The web administrators can be pressed by the government to comply, and the staffing and structure of websites are infiltrated by the Party (See details in *Chapter 6:4.3*). But for foreign websites, such approaches are ineffective. The dispute between Google and the Chinese government is an extreme case where the Internet firm refused to comply with the censorship and this resulted in its abandoning of China's market.

The dispute between Google and the Chinese government was not an isolated case. Many global Internet firms have a conflictive history with the local authorities when setting up business in China. For instance, Microsoft admitted in 2005 that its blogs automatically blocked key words like ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, and Yahoo was accused by a US congressional hearing that they sacrificed their cooperative principles to profit, by helping the Chinese government filter e-mails and messages (Petley, 2009: p.107-8).

Google developed a Chinese-language interface in 2005. Its China-based search page google.cn was launched in 2006. After the establishment of Google China, google.com was inaccessible on mainland China’s Internet (McLaughlin, 2006). Google’s official blog admitted that it compromised in launching a Google domain that restricted information and filtered search results (McLaughlin, 2006; Thompson, 2006). If users searched for prohibited Chinese keywords, the result would be filtered. Users were notified when they tried to access certain search terms that had been restricted. In this case, Google.cn displayed the notification at the bottom of the page: “In accordance with local laws, regulations and policies, part of the search result is not shown” (Text translated from Chinese).

Google China had been the focus of controversy over its capitulation to the Great Firewall since it announced its intention to comply with Internet censorship laws and regulations in China (Bridis, 2006). Google was criticised as a multinational Internet company that assisted government censorship in China (HRW, 2006), and Google China as a flagrant violation of the Google motto “Don’t be evil” (Cohn, 2007, p.30). In responding to these criticisms, Google argued that, despite the compromises involved, it could play a more useful role in China “by participating than by boycotting it” (BBC, 2006).

Google's official blog released a blog named "A new approach to China" on 12 January 2010. It responded to a Chinese-originated hacking attack on it when Gmail accounts of Chinese human rights activists were hacked (Worthen, 2010). The blog indicated that Google.cn would not continue censoring search results and might stop the searching service operation in China as follows:

*We have decided we are no longer willing to continue censoring our results on Google.cn, and so over the next few weeks we will be discussing with the Chinese government the basis on which we could operate an unfiltered search engine within the law, if at all. We recognize that this may well mean having to shut down Google.cn, and potentially our offices in China (Drummond, D., 2010a).*

According to the announcement released by David Drummond, SVP, Google's Corporate Development and Chief Legal Officer on 22 March 2010, Google stopped censoring the search services on Google.cn, including Google Search, Google News, and Google Images. Meanwhile, China's mainland users, who visited Google.cn, would be redirected to Google.com.hk, Google's Hong Kong service which offered uncensored searches in Chinese. However, Drummond stated that, throughout the negotiation, the Chinese government had been "crystal clear" that self-censorship is "a non-negotiable legal requirement", and presumably that Google's decision might cause access to the search engine to be blocked in China (Drummond, D. 2010b).

Although Google argued that offering uncensored searches "is entirely legal and will meaningfully increase access to information for people in China" (Drummond, D., 2010b), it was criticised by Chinese media, which stated that the search result violated China's law and regulations. From 19th June, state owned media CCTV and People's Daily published a series of commentaries to condemn and denounce the fact that pornographic

information was found on Google's search results (Qing, R. 2009; Zi, 2009; Cui, 2009b; Chen, 2009). It was reported that Google search engine might direct users to links with obscene content even though users did not intentionally look for it. For example, searching the keyword "son" would result in links that contained fornication (Chen, 2009).

Google China's uncensored search was accused of demoralisation and causing people antipathy (Zi, 2009). Beijing recruited an Internet monitoring team which consisted of over 10,000 volunteers in June 2009. The team members would supervise the contents of websites and report to the Bureau of Culture Enforcement and Public Security if "pornographic or dirty information" was detected (Cui, 2009a).

A distinct difference between the Chinese government and Google on this debate was the parties' different focus on censorship. Google claimed the decision was not merely made on a financial basis, but that Google.cn would not willingly self-censor its results (Jacobs, 2009b). These uncensored results might contain links to adult content and some of the political content which the Chinese government originally required Google to filter. However, the state owned media in China appeared to only address the issue of adult content and delivered its strong disapproval to them. From the reports and commentaries, criticism of Google defying the government focused on searchable adult contents over Google.cn. However, the crucial issue of searchable, politically sensitive content was somehow neglected. In other words, these reports and commentaries did not mention, quote or comment on the censorship issue that was addressed in Google's announcement.

### 3.4.3.1 Criticism

When Google initially announced its intention to leave China, many young people placed wreaths at the company headquarters in Beijing as a sign of mourning (Helft & Barboza, 2010; joe200362, 2010). However, the donated flowers were promptly removed by security guards. Google's supporters were told that they needed to apply for permits to prevent them from facing accusations of contributing to the "illegal flower tribute" (Osnos, 2010).

It was reported in January that some students and professionals felt disappointed by Google's decision to pull out because they lost access to the company's vast resources (Helft & Barboza, 2010), and others used the real-time service to express their gratitude to Google (Independent, 2010). A large number of tweets with the term #GoogleCN were being created and the stream of tweets increased rapidly (Independent, 2010).

In responding to Google's pull-out in March 2010, Han, a critic, said "farewell Google" in an interview with Tudou.com. (veryeasy, 2010) He commented that Google abandoning China might cause other foreign websites to change their business strategies in China and back out, eventually making China's Internet "the largest local area network (LAN) in the world" (veryeasy, 2010). The video of this interview spread over the Internet, but was later deleted along with his other blog articles which commented on the incident.

It was viewed as a historic moment for Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet project at the University of California, Berkeley. He valued the Internet as a catalyst for China being more integrated into the world. But Google's departure indicated that "China's path

as a rising power is going in a direction different from what the world expected and what many Chinese were hoping for” (Helft & Barboza, 2010).

#### **3.4.4 Weibo and high profile scandals**

This section reviews a number of incidents that occurred in microblogging from 2010 when Sina, a large Chinese Internet firm launched its microblog called ‘Weibo’ or ‘Sina Weibo’, in order to provide a broader picture of the current environment of microblog usage and issues around it. The rise of Weibo corresponded to the blocking of international social network websites in China, such as Facebook and Twitter. The Weibo site successfully filled the void of online social networks among these international websites, and became popular in China. As such, the Sina Weibo was so popular, that the word ‘Weibo’ gradually became a substitution term for ‘microblog’ in Mandarin. For a number of Chinese celebrities, it was fashionable to have a Weibo account and post online content. Along with the celebration of public figures, politicians and government officials also joined in Weibo and registered their personal account. Zhang and Negro (2013) argue that Weibo established its status as a new source for news stories in a short period of time, due to its advantage in fast online content generation, collective news data, and a relatively freer environment from censorship (Zhang & Negro, 2013). The phenomenon of the rise of Weibo and its linkage to online news feeds is similar to Twitter, as it has been argued that Twitter can be considered as an increasingly important online news media resource due to its power as a new mode of information sharing (Kwak *et al.*, 2010).

The relatively freer environment contrasted sharply with the censorship of other forms of offline news media, such as newspapers, TV and radio, where news workers were effectively pressed by the Chinese authorities. In this regard, news that might be censored in the offline news media had a chance to be posted in Weibo as a new form of a news

channel. By introducing these elements, this section provides a context to how this online news was shaped during the rise of Weibo, and how Weibo was later censored by the authorities.

#### **3.4.4.1 Twitter and Facebook**

International social network giants such as Twitter and Facebook did not benefit too much in China's market. Despite Facebook's well-designed Mandarin version, its development in the world's largest Internet market was never easy, as its portal was blocked in China (Oran, O. 2011; Ford, 2012; The Daily Beast, 2011). Only a few Chinese users access Facebook abroad or via a proxy server. The rest are somewhat loyal users of Sina Weibo and Renren (Sina News, 2012b; Yang, 2012; Kejixun, 2012). The epidemic of local microblogs and other forms of social networks in China were dependent on this huge population base: 30 million for Weibo (Yang, 2012) and 20 million for Renren (Kejixun, 2012). However, it is hardly deniable that the ban on foreign social network sites also contributed to the rise of these local companies. In its fourth quarter report of 2011, Sina Weibo had over 300 million users (Yang, 2012). It is considered as the most influential microblog website in China. On the other hand, a report shows that the number of Renren users reached over 200 million in 2012 (Kejixun, 2012).

Along with increasing user numbers and the growing influence on Chinese social networks, both Sina Weibo and the Renren are now eyeing the international market.

When considering questions of copyright, criticisms of these influential websites suggest that they are similar to Twitter and Facebook. Weibo was criticised for stealing Twitter's

ideas, and Renren was accused of copying Facebook's layout. (Han, 2008) Arguably, the rapid expansion of local social network sites benefited from China's problematic intellectual property protection laws.

However, the rise of Sina Weibo and Renren sites occupy microblogging and Internet social networking in China. The role that they play on the Internet is functionally similar, that is, they have established an online speech platform. Chinese users quickly sensed the existence of this new type of platform. On this platform, government censorship and self-censorship of the site are no longer the same as they are in the traditional media. People gain more free space to talk and share. Even if the site assumes a fast and rigorous self-censorship, new comments and messages can spread rapidly before being filtered. In this regard, with the rise of microblogging and Internet social networks, Chinese users arguably entered an era of relative free speech. This new online speech platform has become a window for people to vent dissatisfaction and expose scandals.

#### **3.4.4.2 Scandals and microblogs**

In 2008, the Paris leg of the Olympic torch relay was disrupted by anti-Chinese protests along the route. According to several reports, the torch was extinguished three times (Sandford, 2008; BBC, 2008c; Ward, 2008). The repeated attacks on the procession, and escalating international protests, forced cancellation of the relay (Ward, 2008). This news was quickly spread on Renren. The indignation of the Chinese people was aroused. There was a sense of hostility towards France in the public, and a boycott of China-France trade ensued (Shi, 2008; Sandford, 2008). Meanwhile, nationalist Chinese users called for a boycott of Carrefour and other French brands. The proposal soon spread on Renren. More



resentful users were eager to join (Zhang, 2008; Tan, 2008; BBC, 2008a). In Wuhan, 110,000 people attended the gathering for the boycott (Global Voices, 2008). It was also reported that several robberies occurred in Carrefour (Shi, 2008). Even worse, French cars parked on the road were randomly damaged by protestors. This demonstrated to the Chinese that the network can easily incite the masses, and advocacy of an article or exposure of a scandal can rapidly spread among a specific population through the sharing and dissemination of such information online.

The layout and interface design of Sina Weibo is more conducive to such dissemination. Sina brought in the “@” function from Twitter and Facebook. If user A inputs an @ followed by user B’s usernames, the system will inform the user B in a pop-up window. This mode of transmission enables a message to travel and spread in the form of a spider web. The “@” function was adopted by Renren later on.

The early Renren encouraged users to sign up using their real name. It requested new users to fill registration forms and only allowed verified users to blog and comment. Unlike Renren, Sina Weibo’s registration process was simpler. It did not demand of users to tweet using their real name, until Beijing put pressure on Sina. This advantage suddenly turned microblogging into a natural platform for publishing scandals. It often appears that people learn of a scandal from the Internet before mainstream media expose it.

Often the scandals that are exposed on the Internet appear as complaints or grievances. Here, a typical characteristic is that one party hopes that the pressure of public opinion can undo a purported injustice. For example, the plagiarism scandal of Professor Ma Jiming of Tsinghua University in 2011, (China Education and Research Network, 2011)

and murder case of Yao Jiaxin (BBC, 2011; Xinhua Net, 2011) both demonstrated such a characteristic. The victims were considered the weaker parties. They exposed the incident and presented evidence on the Internet to show that they had been treated unfairly. Microblogs became a cheap and effective platform to call for justice for the weaker party, who are not influential enough to attract the attention of mainstream media, or who cannot financially afford the cost of exposure on mainstream media.

In the case of Professor Ma's plagiarism scandal, Pan Xiaochun, a 41-year-old senior engineer, found that Ma and his Master student Meng Changbo had plagiarised his structure, core formulas, analytical data, conclusion and even some personal expressions from his paper published in 2007. Pan indicated that he was not satisfied with Ma's protracted response even after he tried to report plagiarism to the university several times. Ma denied his act of plagiarism, and the university did not respond to the evidence that Pan provided. Pan felt he did not have a chance to confront the university, merely relying on his individual power. Taking advice from his colleagues, he signed up to Sina Weibo and presented his evidence on the Internet (Sina News, 2011). Soon, the story spread on the Internet and caused a public outcry, which eventually resulted in Tsinghua University admitting that "according to a preliminary judgement", Professor Ma's behaviour was "academic misconduct" (Sina News, 2011).

The murder case of Yao was another example of Internet's role in exposing scandals. The murder victim's family was not satisfied with the slow progress of the investigation half a year after the murder occurred. Wang Hui, the victim Zhao Miao's husband, and his lawyer Zhang Xian, believed Yao had committed a crime of intentional homicide, but the case was not investigated properly allegedly due to the military background of Yao's family and relative low status of the victim. They were afraid the law would not do justice

in this case and the criminal would not be punished in the way he should be (CNTV, 2011). Zhang Xian indicated that he had decided to expose the case on the Internet in order to get the public's attention. He concluded that, for the victim's family, exposure on the Internet is more practical than via mainstream media (Lanzhilei, 2011). When Yao was sentenced with the death penalty on 20th May 2012, some people set off fireworks in front of the court gate to celebrate, as they believed "the criminal gets what he deserves" (Jiang, 2011).

However, some critics are afraid that exposure on the Internet can bring negative effects. Also, Xiao (2011) indicates that the public sphere on the Internet is impossible to control in extreme cases like the murder case of Yao. The masses have shown their interest in scandals, especially when they were persuaded by the victim's side that the military background of Yao's family may have manipulated the judgment of the court (Xiao, 2011a; Xiao, 2011b). Xiao expresses (2011a; 2011b) her concern about the "possibility of tyrannical behaviour as a result of Internet exposure" or "...possibility of tyrannical behaviour by the public as a result of their exposure to the Internet." In the murder case of Yao, the death penalty was critical. The court made the sentencing quickly after the story had been exposed. Here, Nanfang (2011) argued that the wave of public dissatisfaction may somehow have interfered with the independence of the judiciary (Nanfang, 2011).

The spread of information prompting scandals via the Internet can be seen as a consequence of the microblogging era. One typical characteristic of such scandals is that exposure is initiated on the Internet by one of the parties while they are blogging or tweeting. For example, in June 2011, Xie Zhiqiang, director of Liyang City's Public Health Bureau, flirted with his mistress on Sina Weibo (Du, 2011). They discussed details

of how they were having an affair by tweeting. It is reported that, after the exposure, the local disciplinary inspection department began to investigate. Xie Zhiqiang admitted that he was “a newbie to microblogging”. He used microblogging as chatting software, and thought his tweets were private (Liang, X. 2011; Du, 2011). Another example is Zhou Lei, a fashion model who posted pictures of herself with a government official in March 2012. She showed off her luxury party pictures and implied an immoral relationship with the married official by calling him “dear daddy” (Lu, 2012; Wei, 2012).

Social networking technologies enable end users to become editors of their own news stories. Users blog their personal life on the Internet and share it with friends. The exposure of scandals, therefore, occurs when people are blogging and sharing. Out of all the scandals on the Internet, the incident of Guo Meimei and China Red Cross is instructive.

Guo Meimei, a 20-year-old girl, flaunted her wealth on Sina Weibo on 21st June 2011. The pictures that she posted suggested she lived in a large villa, owned expensive sports cars, and had about a dozen designer handbags (Fauna, 2011; Chunshan, 2011). As Sina Weibo verified, she was the “general manager of the Red Cross Society of China”, but argued that “she needs to ride horses every weekend, for example, to cultivate the habits of the rich” (Chunshan, 2011). Users discovered Guo’s life was ordinary in 2008. Her photo album showed that she rented an apartment, used a cheap mobile and tried to sell a second hand car on the Internet. But she suddenly became rich within two years. Her wealth enabled her to upgrade to super cars and a villa. Before she was verified by Sina Weibo as “general manager of the Red Cross Society of China”, her identity on Sina indicated she was an actress (Fauna, 2011). Therefore, the incident was escalated into a controversy over how Guo had switched her profession from an actress to a China Red

Cross's manager, and how her wealth may have emerged from corruption. Although China Red Cross denied on 29th June 2012 that Guo Meimei was employed with the organisation, or that "Red Cross Society of China" was even in existence (Yu, 2011), the accusation of its corruption was still a crucial focus.

Li Chengpeng, writer and social critic, sarcastically claimed that Guo deserved to win "Person of the Year" for China (Li, 2011b). Li compared Guo to Monica Lewinsky because they both played the role of the key that opens the box of scandal and corruption. He argues that, it is magnificent to see how powerful that one tweet could be on the Internet. It forced China Red Cross to hold two press conferences just to respond to it. "China Red Cross's dirty deeds have been exposed by a 20-year-old girl" (Li, 2011b). Furthermore, he argues that, the IT evolution gives ordinary people power that the government did not anticipate: "the government officers do gangdom's job; mistresses do anti-corruption bureau's job" (Li, 2011b).

Unlike the waves stirred up by the incident on the Internet, mainstream media reacted slowly and was relatively quiet. Li regards this reaction as "disgraceful" (Li, 2011a). The TV and newspapers, Li argues, tended to avoid reporting the incident in detail. The attitude of ignoring the obvious was a disgrace to any journalist's conscience; if the Red Cross squandered and embezzled people's donations, it would be serious enough to make the story a headline. The public should have zero tolerance for a charity organisation's corruption and dereliction of its duty. Ironically, the incident became the most popular controversy on the Internet, whereas TV and newspapers silenced themselves on the grounds that they considered that controversy had nothing to do with the public (Li, 2011a).

Some critics believe an important reason that TV and newspaper ignored such a story is that China Red Cross is a governmental organisation. Mainstream media are censored by the top-down administrative method, in which the directives come from the authorities are non-negotiable for its receivers. Professor Larry H. P. Lang of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (hereinafter CUHK) criticised China Red Cross as a monopoly (Lang, 2011). Before Guo Meimei, China Red Cross consistently received criticism of corruption and embezzlement, but the problem did not arouse public attention. People had no knowledge about the nature of China Red Cross as a governmental organisation hidden within several shell companies. And China Red Cross did not seem eager to clarify this information to the people. On the contrary, China Red Cross enjoyed appearing in public when people believed it was a charity and an NGO. This information gap was not known to the public until Guo Meimei exposed it (Chunshan, 2011; Fauna, 2011). Furthermore, Lang describes the complicated relationship between China Red Cross and other local charities as “intolerable”. Here, the aim of doing charitable work seems to be not about helping, but earning money. It was common for schools, hospitals, and even private companies to force students and employees to donate (Wang, Y. H. 2011; An, 2011, Chang, 2011; Cui, 2011). Complaints about this so-called “donation” raised people’s attention, but were not as influential as the coverage of Guo. In addition, the fact that the Red Cross and other charities received donations without clarification of their deployment was also questionable. Complaints and accusations of charity corruption, however, were hardly reported by TV or newspapers due to the Red Cross’s governmental background.

It was argued by some social activists that mainstream media’s slow reaction to the incident was intentional. For example, Han (2011), writer and blogger, believes that China Red Cross and other charities are calm and arrogant because they are embedded

with the government. Even when the accusations from the public escalated, they still had faith in censorship and eradication of free speech. The role that mainstream media played in the incident was not as important as the public had hoped. TV and newspapers did not have much influence in reporting the incident (Han, 2011).

On the other hand, some critics also criticised the role that social network sites played in the affair. Although websites, such as Sina and Renren, might not generally receive the same degree of monitoring and surveillance pressure from officials, some filtering of sensitive information still occurred. After the exposure, Sina Weibo suspended its built-in searching for “China Red Cross” and “Guo Meimei” for a short period of time. Thus, users who searched these key words in Sina Weibo would not find anything (Han, 2011). Therefore, we see that the will of the government had already infiltrated corporate websites (Long, 2012). The influential social networking sites in China, including Sina Weibo, are not truly independent. It is also speculated that the information that these websites filtered may have been on the instruction of the government, or even worse, that government technicians may be actively involved in the censorship (Zhang, 2010).

This method of censoring and filtering has been conducted more than once. For example, in 2012, Sina Weibo adopted a similar suspension on a search function within its site when Wang Lijun, Chongqing city’s top police chief, was branded as a traitor after he visited the U.S. consulates, (Bristow, 2012; Widdall, 2012) and Bo Xilai, a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China was dismissed from his party post (LaFraniere, 2012; BBC, 2012). Before April Fools’ Day in 2012, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo suspended the comment function on microblogs, and deleted users’ protest posts (Want China Times, 2012; Cao, 2012; Alia, 2012). The incident of April Fools’ Day will be detailed in the next section.

### 3.4.4.3 A silent April Fools' Day

From 8 a.m. on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 2012, users found they could not comment on posts on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, the two largest microblogs in China. The comment function on these websites was suspended. Sina's announcement explained that the suspension was temporary. The purpose of the suspension was to create a better interactive environment on the Internet. To achieve this "beneficial interactive environment" (Dan, 2012), Sina stated that there was a need for rumour "clean up" (Dan, 2012):

*"Recently there has been an increase in the amount of rumours and other illegal and harmful information appearing in microblog comments. In order to carry out a concentrated clean up of these comments, from 8am 31st March until 8am 3rd April we will be temporarily suspending the comment function on microblogs. Following this tidying up, we will restore the comment function. Carrying out this necessary clearing of information is in order to ensure a more beneficial interactive environment for everyone. We hope to have your understanding. Thank you to everyone for your support" (Dan, 2012).*

Although Sina and Tencent censored the content which might have contained sensitive information, a large-scale suspension without public announcement did not occur. The 31<sup>st</sup> of March announcement was seen as evidence of the government's administrative interference, since two competitive Internet giants in China chose to filter their contents at the same time.

Sina's short announcement did not mention crucial details that interested the public, for example, Sina did not clarify which "rumours" and "illegal and harmful information" had increased, and how this illegal and harmful information was identified. Furthermore,



along with its real-name registration, people were concerned about whether Sina and other social network sites would monitor these users who posted or shared illegal information, and whether users' privacy could be protected (Zhang, 2010).

The definition of illegal and harmful information was later clarified by *Information Times*. On 31st March 2012, the *Information Times* headline read: "Involved in spreading rumours of Beijing coup; 16 websites suspended; Sina and Tencent Weibo penalised" (*Information Times*, 2012; Branigan, 2012; Britow & Patience 2012). The report directly indicated that the suspension was caused by the downfall of Bo Xilai (Britow & Patience 2012), former CPC Chongqing Committee Secretary and former Minister of Commerce of the PRC. Bo Xilai's removal from his position and suspension from the Politburo aroused stories that spread over the Internet. Although the news of Bo's pending investigation for serious disciplinary violations was announced officially by the state's own media on 10th April, (China News, 2012; Buckley, 2012) microbloggers kept one step ahead of state media by pre-empting the event before the official admission (Branigan, 2012).

A direct effect of the suspension of the comment function was that microbloggers could not interact and communicate. The blogging appeared to be bulletin posts rather than vivid interactions between users. It was suspected that the reason the suspension took effect one day before April Fools' Day was because the government worried that more rumours would be spread on 1st April (Yip, 2012; Gao, 2012). As a consequence, 1st April 2012 became a silent day on the Internet in China.

#### 3.4.4.4 Debates concerning real-name registration

As noted, Xiaonei.com, the former portal of Renren, controversially replicated the layout of Facebook. It was also argued that it did not just replicate Facebook's appearance but also its essence, including source codes and some central ideas (Rand, 2009). For example, Facebook required identity authentication for new registrations (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Similarly, Xiaonei's new users needed to provide personal details to sign up. As it originally targeted post- and under-graduates, these details included a new user's name, gender, name of college or university, department, and details of accommodation. However, the difference between Xiaonei's identity authentication and the real-name registration that was later required by Sina and Tencent Weibo was that, the authentication simply *encouraged* users to register on a real name basis. If users submitted applications with fake names, they could still register.

Yet, real name registration is not insisted upon in microblogs. Instead, Sina uses so-called "micro-identity" to encourage people to register on a real name basis. Users who request micro-identity in the form of a digital "honorable medal" need to submit applications with their real names and ID card numbers. Sina also designed a series of virtual rewards for micro-identity bloggers. For instance, micro-identity bloggers can be ranked in the charts of most welcomed bloggers, (Sina News, 2012) which shows how welcome the bloggers are among their friends. Here, users who want to know their popularity need to be real-name verified.

The side effect that microblogs brings here is controversial. Real-name registration objectors believe that the platform of debate on the Internet provides every participant with opportunities to reason and clarify (Yu, 2012; Han, 2011). On the other hand,

supporters argue that the boundaries of free speech in microblogs are obscure. It sometimes appears that users curse and attack each other in microblogs. Feng Xiaogang, a film director, criticised some users' Internet behaviour as he believed they spoke like "uneducated people" and attacked others without morality (Liang, 2012). He tweeted on his personal page that whoever did not speak with morality on the Internet was what he called "an animal being" (Liang, 2012). A bolder criticism was from Zhou Libo, a comedian. Zhou compared the public discussion space on the Internet with the public toilet, as he believed that people left their "obscene content" if they were displeased (Wen, 2010).

Objectors to real-name registration express their fears in relation to four aspects. Firstly, objectors suspect that users' personal information may be leaked to other parties, and microblogs are not able to guarantee the protection of users' privacy (Liang, 2012). This leads to the second concern which is that some objectors are afraid that they can become vulnerable targets if they reveal their real-name on the Internet. The concern is especially addressed by Han (2011), who believes the government can have access to users' personal information if it requests it. In this case, real-name registration enables government restrictions on free speech (Han, 2011). Thirdly, sceptics doubt that real-name registration can be applied nationwide, due to the differences of regions, and technical power that websites possess (Han, 2011). Lastly, compulsory real-name registration is criticised as being contrary to the anonymity of the Internet (Liang, 2012). Some users enjoy playing different characters in the virtual world, and the real-name registration would ruin their fictitious personalities (Liang, 2012).

Some critics worried that real-name registration would eventually become compulsory if technical difficulties were resolved. For example, Han (2011) believed that the

philosophy of censoring and monitoring the Internet was inherited by the Chinese government from its censorship on TV and newspapers. The methods might have changed accordingly, but the management of content control was nearly the same regardless of the differences between traditional media and the Internet (Han, 2011). If real-name registration became compulsory, freedom of speech on the Internet would be heavily interfered with by the government. Han alleged that most users who objected to the real-name registration were not averse to the registration in itself, but rather they were concerned about whether the government would continuously restrict the Internet, and use real-name registration as a tool to shackle freedom of speech (Han, 2011).

Furthermore, Han (2011) argues that the uncompromising interference in April Fools' Day in 2012 proved that the current image of a happy and free public sphere on the Internet was inaccurate. It was not the environment of freedom of speech that the public expected and desired. Government power over the Internet was still authoritarian. The government's attitude in this incident was clearly non-negotiable. Therefore, he predicted that an implementation of real-name registration would de-liberalise the environment of the Internet.

Furthermore, adopting the concept of China's economic reform, he proposed the solution of marketisation. He suggested that, the development of free speech needs to be marketised with little interference by the government. The Chinese government started economic reform roughly from 1978, and for the last three decades, taking advantage of market principles, China's economy grew remarkably fast. Yet progress in marketisation may be controversial as the nature of China's economic model no longer embraces the planned economy. In comparison with the rapid growth of the economy, marketisation in other areas, including in the field of censorship, is relatively slow.

To sum up, by reviewing the incidents and scandals in microblogging from 2008, this section has set up the background to the development of censorship in microblogging, and provides the context for understanding the mechanism of censorship in three aspects:

1) The spread of scandals via microblogs was considered as a sign of transition where the old protocol of censorship of news media was overturned and the new one was formulating. That is, the microblog provides an online news channel for news stories that might expose the government and its officials in a negative light, and which would not be seen in offline news media.

2) Microblogs were once a freer channel for news stories before the Chinese authorities stepped in and intervened. The freer environment of online censorship had led to a relative increase in the discussion of scandals. It corresponds to the channelisation theory (*Chapter 2:2.1*) which indicates that public resentment can be destructive if it is suppressed by pressure from the censor.

3) The silent April Fools' Day was a significant turning point as the authorities started tightening the restrictions on microblogs, as specific topics were forbidden on Weibo, and key word searching was filtered. This indicates that the Chinese authorities adapted the protocol of censorship of offline news media and applied it to the online news.

### **3.4.5 The southern media**

The aim of reviewing the southern media is to determine the following aspects of this study. Firstly, led by the Southern Weekly, southern media differ from microblogs, where the update of online news content is largely dependent on the uploading from its

registered users. The southern media employ professional journalists and editors to work on the production of news, and provide them with strong support against administrative interference. Secondly, the review provides a historical context for a later stage of analysis which explains why the southern media are seen as ‘rebellious’ and ‘radical’ to the authorities. It also provides an argument that explains the historical and economic reasons for their liberal tradition. Reviewing the context of the southern media is central to analysing the news media’s influence on public opinion which is also mentioned by respondents in the interviews.

The southern media is a group of liberal and uncompromised media organisations which is often opposed to the authorities’ interference over the news media in China. Most of these media organisations are located in the south. To look into the historical and economic background of the southern media provides the political context of China’s activist journalists and their attempts to resist the administrative interference from the Communist Party and the government.

If there was a book on China’s modern history, Guangzhou would be an important chapter because a number of revolutions and incidents were initiated in and exploded out of this province. In 1839, shortly before the First Opium War, Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu ordered the confiscation and destruction of opium in Humen, Dongguan of Guangzhou. The destruction of opium was seen as the *casus belli* of the First Anglo-Chinese War. Dissent and a regional uprising organised by the Tongmenghui and Sun Yat-sen, a revolutionary and first president of the Republic of China, were launched in Guangzhou and nearby provinces from 1895, including the famous and tragic Second Guangzhou Uprising, also known as the Yellow Flower Mound Uprising. These anti-Qin Dynasty movements preceded the Xinhai Revolution (1911–1912), which overthrew China’s last

imperial dynasty and established the Republic of China. In 1924, the Republic of China Military Academy (ROCMA) was founded in Huangpu in Guangzhou. It was the first modern military academy in China. It educated and generated army officers who contributed their military talents to the Kuomintang (KMT) army force and later fought in wars such as the Northern Expedition (1926–1928) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). Both KMT and the Communist Party established their bases in Guangzhou of Guangdong: KMT's central Party headquarters were relocated in Guangzhou in 1925, and Mao Zedong founded Political Weekly in the same city in 1927.

In economic terms, Guangdong has been one of the most developed areas in China for a century. It possesses a number of natural ports and well-equipped railway stations, and is geographically a neighbour of Hong Kong, a free-trade port and colony of the UK until 1997. All of these advantages make Guangzhou economically strong in trading, light industry and orientation. Currently, there are six special economic zones (SEZ) in China, and half of them (Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Shantou) are in Guangdong.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Based on the literature reviewed, the theories of Confucian limited freedom of the right to speak, and the work on CCP's propaganda, gatekeeping, judgement of news values, and construction of online news media, this chapter has provided an overview of the specific elements of Chinese history and philosophy that relate to the operation of censorship practices in China. The articulation of Confucian thought and its legacy provides historical and cultural perspectives for individual freedom in China. The reviews on the CCP's earlier political proposition of media supervision, before the establishment

of PRC and its propaganda strategy of presenting itself as the saviour of the Chinese nation, demonstrate how Maoism was associated with freedom of the press in China. Lastly, the third part of this chapter has explored the mechanism of media censorship in China, from aspects of gatekeeping, news-value judgement of news workers, and construction of Chinese print and online news media. All of these establish the basis for the methodological frameworks that will be outlined in the next chapter, and will be analysed in the later chapters of 5, 6 and 7.

Speech crime was common in the 1960s and 1970s and a great number of people who criticised the authorities were convicted of it, but nowadays a single prosecution of a news worker or a critic may cause an enormous social response. An infamous instance is the case of Liu Xiaobo. Liu Xiaobo was portrayed as a rebel and sentenced to imprisonment for the crime of inciting subversion of state power, (Chen, 2010; BBC, 2010) whereas the Noble Prize committee awarded him the Peace Prize in 2010 for 'his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China'. While Liu Xiaobo was serving his time in prison, criticism and speculation damaged the Chinese government's reputation. Foreign and domestic media became concerned about China's lack of free speech and questioned the Chinese government's determination and efforts to improve the situation.

Furthermore, this chapter looks at the establishment and development of technological means that have been applied by the Chinese authorities to censor online content in China. It is seen as the first level of the revised-pyramid model of online censorship construction. By reviewing public reactions to and criticisms of these filtering and monitoring projects, this chapter provides a historical and political context to these technological means, to be referred to in the analysis of the whole picture behind the construction of online



copyright, in later chapters. The next chapter will outline the theoretical approaches and research methods that have been used in this study, which aims to gather empirical data for the analysis of the other levels of online censorship: the censorship of the cyber police and the online news workers.

This last section starts with an introduction to the construction of online censorship in China, as an essential part of the research focus, namely, one of the five elements of the earlier identified, censorship inverted pyramid. It illustrates an inverted-pyramid with different levels of censorship mechanisms. This section therefore aims to explore the top level of the technological mechanism of Internet censorship, whereas the lower levels, including public security monitoring and the censorship and self-censorship protocol in the online newsroom, will be analysed in the following chapters.

The next chapter will detail the conceptual and methodological approaches used in this study. It will discuss the aims and methods of the investigation as providing thick description (Geertz, 1973) to the context of online news censorship in China. In addition, it will explore the rationale and strategy for field observation in the online newsroom and interviews of online news workers, in order to thematically analyse the protocols of online censorship in the processes of news production.

# Chapter 4 Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

The research methodology for this thesis will be detailed in this chapter in order to specify the conceptual and methodological approach used throughout. It is divided into two sections. The first explains the aims of the investigation: to provide a coherent description and analysis of how China's online news media are being censored by the Chinese authorities, and how these media self-censor within their particular contexts in China. It also explains the scope of this research, and outlines the guiding research questions and the approach used. By answering these questions, it provides a thick description (Geertz, 1973) for censorship and self-censorship in the context of the environment, which is the primary intention of this study. The second section explores the research methods that have been used. It contains the rationale and strategy for each method respectively. This completes the design of the methodology.

## 4.2 Aims and scope

The main aim of this research is to provide a coherent description and analysis of the environment of censorship and self-censorship of the online news media in China. The research is focused on three areas. Firstly, the research examined the formal and informal mechanisms of control which impact upon how the Chinese online news media experience censorship. Pressure from the Chinese authorities, which is outlined in the interviews, is seen as a key aspect of Chinese news media's censorship and self-

editorial policy. The second aspect looks at how Chinese online news media formulate and practice their own editorial policy in order to comply with the demands of the authorities. Lastly, attention is paid to how editors and journalists who work in the Chinese online media experience, adapt and respond to China's approach to media censorship and control.

The first and second aspects center on policy: the formal policy of the Chinese authorities and the policy and policymaking process of a particular online news media organisation in China. The latter involved an ethnographic study of editorial meetings, and conferences of governmental publicity divisions. Therefore, an approach of field observation was used. Also, interviews were conducted to explore the third aspect, because the self-censorship of editors and journalists involves individual experiences and practices which can be revealed by face-to-face conversation.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How and why do the Chinese authorities censor the Chinese online news media?  
*(focus: motivation for censorship policy of online news media)*
2. How do the Chinese online news media formulate a policy of censorship and self-censorship to comply with the censorship of the government? *(focus: policymaking process)*
3. How do the Chinese online news media practise the policy of self-censorship on their website to comply with the censorship of the government? *(focus: self-censorship of online news media)*
4. How do the editors and journalists who work for the online news media self-censor to comply with the policy? *(focus: self-censorship of editors and journalist)*

### 4.3 Theoretical Approach

The term 'qualitative research' is difficult to define, as it covers a wide range of techniques and philosophies (Flick, 2002; Yin, 1998). However, in the field of social science, it can be understood as an approach that allows researchers of social science to examine people's experience in detail, by using a set of research methods (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.8-9; Blaikie, 2010: p.7-9; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: p.2-4). In this project, the overall aim of applying a qualitative research approach is to provide a coherent yet rich description and analysis in an environment characterized by censorship and self-censorship. In order to achieve this, a blueprint that connects researchers to research philosophies, strategies and methods for collecting and analysing empirical data is required (Stone, 2010: Vol. 2 p.13; Berg, 2009).

In-depth interviews and observation are used to build up what Geertz (1973) initially called a thick description, which identifies the roles and experiences of the participants in the context of their lives. In this research, a thick description is sketched for the environment of China's free speech on the Internet. These interpretive approaches place emphasis on different aspects. Observation enables the researcher to study people in their natural settings; "to identify how their experiences [...] are shaped by the context of their lives" (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011; p.170-1), and in-depth interviews allow participants to tell their own story of their experiences of censorship and self-censorship. The aims of conducting these methods, along with their applications, are recalled respectively in the section on data collection in this chapter.

### **4.3.1 Research philosophy**

As Bryman (2004: p.4) highlights, the practices of social research do not exist in a vacuum: “they are linked with the ways in which social scientists envision the connection between different viewpoints about the nature of social reality and how it should be examined” (Bryman, 2004: p.4).

The perspective of interpretivism (Schwandt, 2000) fundamentally underpins this research, as the research questions revealed that an interpretivistic analysis of empirical data of censorship and self-censorship in the online news media in China is regarded, in Blaikie’s (2010: p.99) words, as “the product of its inhabitants in social reality”. It focuses on understanding people’s subjective meaningful experience from the perspective of people themselves and understanding “the meaning of social actions within the context in which people live” (Snape & Spencer, 2008: p.7; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011: p.14-5). Therefore, in this research, the emphasis is put on the personal reflections of participants on censorship and self-censorship, and the environment of online news media that is socially constructed.

### **4.3.2 Framework**

Figure 3, below, visualises four fundamental stages of this study: exploratory, interviewing, data collecting, and analysis and discussion.

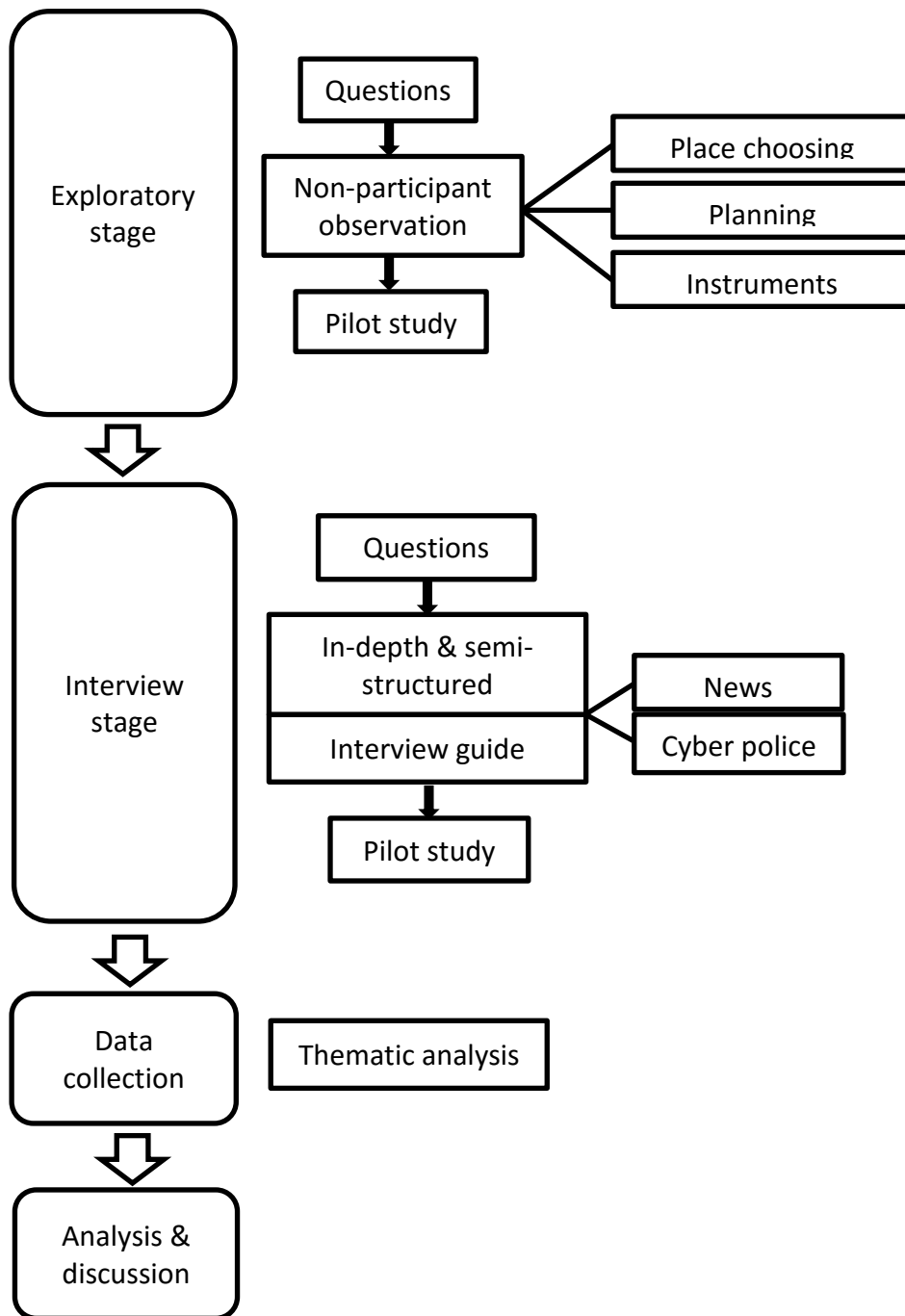


Figure 3 Framework of research approaches

In the exploratory stage, I explain how the observation is designed in three phases: observation questions, participating level, and pilot study. Here, empirical data such as field notes and a diary are collected to provide a contextual basis for the next stage, the

interviewing stage. This consists of four phases: main interview questions, setting and sampling strategies, interview guide, and the pilot study.

The fieldwork stage comes after the completion of the first two; after the research design and pilot study. After the empirical data are collected, at the fourth stage, we end with the analysis and writing-up. In his Hong Kong school fieldwork of the study of education for citizenship, Lai (2005: p.74-5) analysed his field diary while observing and recording daily, in order to make a decision “based on analysis and requested the school to help and cooperate likewise”. Hence, it is worth noting that for this study, observing, interviewing, and recording in the fieldwork realistically demands in-time analysis.

## **4.4 Observation**

### **4.4.1 Aims and objectives**

Observation is often used within an ethnographic approach. Spradley (1980: p.3) and Barbour (2008: p.92) evaluate that an ethnographic approach requires carrying out ethnographic fieldwork and is in essence the work of describing the culture. But it should also be stressed that the scope of the usage of ethnographic fieldwork has expanded. It has been used in social studies for a long time (Delamont, 2004: p.217-9; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since the study of individuals and their socio-cultural communities, defined by Casey and Edgerton (2005), there has been a growing application of ethnographic approaches in the field of social research. For example, Fetterman and Pitman (1986) argued that federally funded evaluations in education in the United States had involved ethnographic components.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) sketched the historical expansion of the ethnographical approach and its diversification in political studies in a social context. For this study, the concepts of censorship and self-censorship in China are “socially constructed phenomena that mean different things to different people” (Mertens, 1998: p.11).

There are two aims for using observation in this research. The first aim is to obtain a detailed description of the dynamic interaction of China’s online news production, including observation of action, reaction, and interaction in relation to the acquiescence to and negotiation with censorship within the newsroom. Attention was paid to three different professional roles: Online journalists, editors, and web administrators. The range of the description covered their individual actions (e.g. what they do and what they do not do), their reactions (e.g. handling the censorship and self-censorship pressure), and the interactions that involve pressure of censorship from their superiors. Observation is capable of achieving the goal of this research, as it is defined as a method that “enables researchers to systematically observe and record people’s behaviour, actions and interactions” (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2010: p.170). Hence, observational methods for this study involve “the systematic, detailed observation of behaviour”, watching and recording how online journalists, editors, and web administrations act and interact and negotiate censorship (Mays and Pope, 1995: p.182).

The second aim is to provide exploratory support for interviewing from the records of field notes and diary. Bivens (2008) conducts his research by using observation to cast widely in an effort to collect as much information as possible within the scope of the research. In the chapter on historical development (*Chapter 4*), the narratives and mechanics of China’s Internet censorship have been explored. The chapter provides a sketch of Internet censorship in China. But for the purpose of a deeper understanding of



different roles and the interactions among them, research is required for first-hand observation and recording. Records produced in fieldwork, such as field notes, can achieve this purpose. Further, a field diary is used as a complementary tool to record the researcher's thoughts on the research to enrich the data. Noonan (2008: p.48) uses a field diary to allow himself to talk and record those involved "in this area informally about the research and get valuable feedback".

The method of observation falls under the interpretive paradigm, as stated earlier. To provide complementary data and understand issues from different perspectives (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.170), it is combined with in-depth interviews.

#### **4.4.2 Questions and focus**

To make actions and interactions such as censoring and self-censoring observable, the questions in observations are listed as follows:

In China's online news media

1. What do journalists do?
2. What don't journalists do?
3. What do editors do?
4. What don't editors do?
5. What do web administrators do?
6. What don't web administrators do?
7. How do journalists react to the pressure of censorship?
8. How don't editors react to the pressure of censorship?
9. How don't web administrators react to the pressure of censorship?
10. How do journalists, editors, and web administrators interact to the pressure of censorship?

11. Where does the pressure of censorship come from? Explicit or implicit pressure?

From the government? The administrators? Self?

12. What is a production team meeting like? Who gives the instructions?

13. What is a briefing or a press conference like? Who gives the instructions?

These questions can be divided into three aspects, and each aspect has its own focus. The first six questions focus on individual acts of three fundamental roles in a normal Chinese online news media production team: online journalists, editors and web administrators. I observed what online journalists, editors, and web administrators do, in order to record how they work as individuals, and what their newsroom duties entail. Furthermore, the record can be used to distinguish what different roles they play, and don't play in the newsroom. This leads to the second focus on how online journalists, editors and web administrators react under the pressure of censorship. In the second aspects, from questions 7 to 9, I observed how these different roles responded to the pressure in the newsroom. In other words, I observed and recorded what they did in dealing with the pressure of censorship as individual actors and as a team. The last focus is on the interaction among these three roles. From questions 10 to 13, I observed how they interacted on the censorship instructions on different occasions. For example, how did they react in newsroom meetings and private coffee time? What is the difference? Furthermore, I differentiated and distinguished the origin of the pressure by observing the newsroom meeting, and the press briefing and press conference held by the government.

Several aspects of observation can be focused on fieldwork. For example, people's behaviour, actions and interactions, their language and body language, and the social setting where the actions and interactions occur (Mays and Pope, 1995: p.182). However, as suggested, focusing more on one aspect than others may provide a deeper insight into

the norms and values surrounding behaviour and the social setting (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey; 2011: p.173). Depending on the observation of the production and operation of online news media under the pressure of censorship, the focus is on actions and interactions, and the observation on language and social setting. Therefore the design is complementary, because observing and recording the actions and interactions can integrate the picture with rich data on the situation and the interplay of power or social control (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey; 2011: p.174-6). This is similar to Graham's study (1997), as he observed actions and interactions between audiences who sit in the context of computer-based virtual artwork and examined the theory of its relationship to the audience. He also set the audience conversation as complementary to enrich his data (Graham, 1997).

Questions about how generally or particularly censorship is/was operated are asked in the interviews, but observation is still needed as it enables the researcher to gain perspectives from other angles. Compared with the interviews, the benefit of observation, the risk of post hoc rationalisation, is avoided. This is interpreted as follows:

*“This approach (note: interviews) can yield one type of data, but there is also the risk of post hoc rationalization of certain behaviours, whereby participants then adjust how they describe their behaviour as a form of justification or rationalization. With observation you are able to view what people actually do, so you learn about how people really behave and also how certain behaviours are influenced by the situation or context in which they are conducted” (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey; 2011: p.173).*

Thus, observation on actions and interactions of news workers who work in the online media industry may give the research access to more nuanced information especially when people's language contradicts their actions (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey; 2011: p.173-4).

#### **4.4.3 Approach to observation**

The types of observation, referring to the level of researcher participation, can be viewed as a “continuum” (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.178) between two extremes: the range of the researcher’s role in observation derives one end of complete participation to another end of complete invisibility (Robson, 1995). In this project, observation is going to be adopted, in some way, very close to invisibility. I focused on observing the activities of Internet content censoring by not participating in them. However, it is worth noting that as Robson (1995) indicates, complete invisibility is theoretically impossible to achieve in reality, as the researcher is always present in the social setting. This has also been acknowledged in the pilot study and addressed as a natural limitation of this method.

The mode of observation was non-participant. It has been argued by several scholars that non-participant observation allows the researcher to observe people’s actions and interactions from a distance (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.185). From the pilot study, I realised that non-participant observation was more suitable because of the need to minimise the researcher’s personal influence on the online newsroom’s workflow and activities. Socialisation and interaction with the news workers, especially the journalists, could heavily influence the research, and the researcher’s personal involvement and participation would certainly have had some impact on the newsroom dynamic.

The non-participant observation allows the researcher to observe people’s actions and interactions from a distance. Observing, listening and recording can be done more freely in the process. The key to conducting a non-participant observation is to blend into the background and try not to influence the activities (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.185).

However, because of the theoretical impossibility of complete invisibility, as stated above, rapport building and other negotiations with participants are still required for overcoming this methodological flaw.

#### **4.4.4 Choice of place**

The news organisation was chosen based on whether its online news workers had experience in reporting some key incidents of this research, such as the Wenzhou train collision and Bo Xilai's downfall. I chose the local news media organisation Wenzhou News (WN) for observation. WN is an online news media organisation that has considerable coverage in local community in Wenzhou, and is the online media for the Wenzhou News Group. Its employees have experience in covering the breaking of an explosive news story, and handling the procedure of censoring and self-censoring is a daily routine. The length of the fieldwork was four weeks. The length of time spent in the newsroom is based on observation in the pilot study. Web administrators were scheduled to hold a meeting at the beginning of every month, and in these meetings, web administrators would brief online journalists and other editors on tasks in the following month. Therefore, four weeks is a reasonable length of time to observe and study the process of online news production. The observation was from 6<sup>th</sup> May to 3<sup>rd</sup> June in 2011.

According to its official announcement retrieved from February 2012, Wenzhou News, domain name 66wz.com, was established in December 2000. It is owned by the Wenzhou News Group and in 2008 it became the most popular local news website in China. It meets the criterion of the research project that its employees, namely journalists and editors, have experience in handling the procedure of censoring and self-censoring, and already have a daily routine, for example, dealing with the situation of reporting an incident, such as the Wenzhou train collision.

It is the researcher's background as a former journalist at Wenzhou News which affords a further advantage to conducting observation. As it has been suggested, beginning rapport development in the early stages of fieldwork is crucial (Swanson & Holton III, 2005), as this process of rapport building determines "the level of trust that the community or the group under study" has in the researchers (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.192).

### ***Background of the Wenzhou News and its host media organisation***

The local online news media organisation *Wenzhou News* was chosen for observation for several reasons, detailed in *Chapter 3: 4.4*. In short, WN was one of the most visited local news websites in Wenzhou, and its online news workers had first-hand experience in reporting the Wenzhou train collision in 2011. The website describes itself as an "objective and affectionate" (WN, 2013a) online news media with the largest news coverage in the Wenzhou community. Its news service manages the local newsgathering network, and its official language is Mandarin. The website has an online news section along with blogs/microblogs and forums. As the main concern of this research is to study censorship of online news, the observation was made in its online news section, which is responsible for reporting, broadcasting and re-posting local news.

Its online news service is an integral component of the multiplatform Wenzhou News Media Group (WNMG). WN Online is a multiplatform subsidiary to the traditional news services of the main WNMG company. This form of integration can also be found in western media such as the BBC and its online news supplements (Way, 2013). WN is a popular website in its local region, with 1.1 million weekly users (WN, 2013b). Its

popularity is significantly localised, as about 90 percent of the hits on its web-pages are from IP addresses in the Wenzhou region (WN, 2013b).

#### **4.4.5 Planning**

Observation was conducted over a period of one month. An observation guide was brought to this study. So far, this is an original idea, i.e. a supplement to the data collecting. The idea of employing an observation guide was inspired by the pattern of using an interview guide. An interview guide is usually sketched as a list of questions which reminds the interviewer of the focus of the research. The observation guide does the same.

##### **4.4.4.1 Instruments**

Field notes were taken as the method of recording when the observation was conducted. The notes became important data for analysis. It is advisable that field notes also include those things that may not seem important at the time, because their importance may become clear later during analysis (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.194).

It is worth emphasising that the field notes should be understood in a way that shows the focus is on descriptions of elements and actions, rather than interpretations of them. Furthermore, recording objective field notes pays attention to the detailed documentation in chronological order. In addition, a field diary is adopted in order to gain a set of rich data for analysis, as stated above.

#### **4.4.6 Pilot study**

The pilot study was conducted in the offices of journalists and editors of Wenzhou News to pre-test the design for several reasons. Firstly, it helped the researcher to verify the efficiency of observing (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.193). Secondly, the researcher's observation skills can be pre-tested and enhanced in a pilot study. Thirdly, the continuation of rapport-building with the team of journalists and editors at Wenzhou News aids the researcher's invisibility by blending into the news group (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.193).

The pilot study also contributed to this research in four aspects: firstly, at the stage of the pilot study, skills of observing and recording were enhanced from practice. Secondly, initial knowledge of conducting observation in fieldwork was gained and was therefore advantageous in designing the method for this project. Thirdly, the rapport-building with online journalists, editors, web administrators, and cyber police could help me to blend more easily into the environment while the observation formally started. Lastly, the close relationship that I consistently built eased the difficulties of accessing interviewees for sensitive topics.

##### ***4.4.5.1 Initial observations of the pilot study***

The roles of editors and web administrators have overlapped in some areas. Both of these roles have the responsibility of monitoring online news content on their websites. Meanwhile, online journalists are rarely found to be obliged to censor the news content. In fact, online journalists worked at the bottom of the news production chain in the field. What these journalists publish depends not only on what they actually produce, but more



on what web administrators orientate and what remains after it has been censored by the editors.

One of the main differences between editors and web administrators is that the latter are heavily engaged in corresponding with the publicity department of the government on a daily basis, while the focus of editors is on content monitoring. Moreover, web administrators prefer to give top-down instructions, and editors censor what journalists produce and coordinate the relationship between online journalists and the administrative board. It also appears that, on most occasions, web administrators have higher authority for decision-making in the online news media, due to their position at the higher administrative level.

#### **4.4.7 Limitations**

In practice, it is difficult to be an absolutely invisible observer. An observer who carries recording materials, such as a notebook and pen, or electronic devices, would to a certain degree influence the behaviour of the participants as they interact. It was foreseen and acknowledged in a pilot study that the members of the newsroom often notice the observer as an outsider. For the purpose of collecting data in these circumstances, in which the participants work spontaneously, the process of observation requires careful preparation and rapport-building beforehand. Thus, the observer can minimise his interfering with the participants' behaviour.

Furthermore, observation has its weakness in generalising a theory. The local online news media organisation that was chosen cannot represent the entire picture of this industry in China and not every detail of the mechanisms of its news production can be fully

interpreted. Hence, it is important to conduct in-depth interviews in the next stage, due to their exploratory function.

## **4.5 In-depth interviews**

### **4.5.1 Aim and objectives**

The in-depth interview has been chosen as one of the essential approaches for the methodology of the project. Li (2008; p.80) argues that the interview is a method suitable for examining the impact of the media on decision-making. In his case study of EU-China relations in the post-Cold War era, he specifies that the semi-structured interview is the key to exploring the interaction between news media and external policy through preparation and flexibility. In this study, the aim of using in-depth interviews is to collect empirical data of perspectives on and experiences of censorship and self-censorship within China's online news media from two groups of participants: the Chinese publicity authorities and members from the newsroom of China's online news media.

In-depth interviews are widely used as a data collection strategy in social science research. For his case study of Dissent's media practices on meditation and political contention McCurdy (2009) selects the semi-structured qualitative interviews for their emphasis on structure while accommodating "spontaneous, reflexive interaction" (McCurdy, 2009: 136) between two parties – the interviewer and interviewee. For this study, all interviews are semi-structured. This type of interview can provide a breadth of data by asking open-ended questions with purpose, and its nature allows the researcher to adjust questions accordingly while the interviews are being conducted (Fontana & Frey, 2000: pp.652-3; Adams & Hicks, 2001).

The aim of using in-depth interviews in this research is to collect empirical data from online journalists, editors, web administrators, and cyber police. Questions were asked of these four roles, in order to capture their perceptions and experiences of censorship within the Chinese online news media. There are eight core questions:

***4.5.1.1 Aspects of news production:***

1. How do online editors operationalise censorship instructions and regulations in the newsroom?
2. How do online journalists respond and react to censorship instructions and regulations in the newsroom?
3. How do web administrators coordinate with censorship instructions and regulations in the newsroom?
4. How do web administrators operationalise censorship instructions in the newsroom?

***4.5.1.2 Aspects of evaluation:***

5. How do online editors evaluate censorship instructions and regulations?
6. How do online journalists evaluate censorship instructions and regulations?
7. How do web administrators evaluate censorship instructions and regulations?
8. How do cyber police evaluate censorship instructions and regulations?

**4.5.2 Design**

All interviews in this study were semi-structured for the reasons stated above. Furthermore, the in-depth interviews are designed as a one-to-one method of data

collection (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011; p.109). In an interview, one interviewer and one interviewee were involved in having an in-depth conversation on specific topics, such as the personal experiences of working under the pressure of censorship and the perspectives of the authorities.

These semi-structured interviews were conducted as face-to-face conversations. As Shuy (2003, p.181) argues, face-to-face conversations elicit “more thoughtful” and “more accurate” responses than other forms of conversation interviews. However, the geographical dispersal of interviewees required other means for conducting the interviews, such as phone or online-conversation. McCurdy (2009; p.139-141) used phone and email interviewing after consistent rapport-building with his interviewees since the different interviewees were from different geographical areas. In this research, every effort was made to ensure each interview was conducted face-to-face.

### **4.5.3 Participants and sampling**

#### ***4.5.3.1 Rationale of selection***

Two groups of participants were included in the interviews. They are the cyber police and online news workers. The participant codes, gender, age, education background, administrative status and the unit (office/news organisation) they worked for are listed in Table 1, below:

Table 1 Details of interviewees

<i>Code</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education background</i>	<i>Administrative status</i>	<i>Unit</i>
P00	F	24	Bachelor of Media Studies	Journalist	Wenzhou Evening Paper
P01	M	33	Bachelor of Publishing and Editing	Journalist	Wenzhou News
P02	F	30	Bachelor of Economics and Finance	Editor	Wenzhou News
P03	M	54	Diploma of Chinese Literature	Web administrator, editor	Qianjiang Evening Paper
P04	M	33	Diploma of Publishing and Editing	Editor	Wuhai Online
P05	M	51	MBA	Cyber police officer	Director of Department of NIS, Bureau of Public Security
P06	M	39	Bachelor of Politics	Web administrator,	Qianjiang Evening Paper
P07	M	36	Bachelor of Security and Law Enforcement	Cyber police officer	Cyber policeman of Bureau of Public Security

### **Cyber police officers**

There are three reasons to interview Chinese cyber police who are subordinated to the public security system in China. Firstly, cyber police are seen as censors for the construction of mechanisms (see *Chapter 1:2.5*). They are an important element in the structure of the mechanisms of online news censorship, as they represent how the Chinese government oversee and monitor online news media. Secondly, interviewing cyber police officers reveals the protocols of censorship of online news media, as they deliver the pressures of censorship and demands of the authorities to individual online news workers. It also examines how these pressures and demands influence, obstruct or interfere with the processes of online news production in the way in which the online journalists and editors have to take precautions at different stages of news production, and how they conceive and report news stories that fit into the requirement of being “harmonious”.

Lastly, in-depth interviews allow this research to acquire data for analysing a number of aspects of the cyber police from the perspective of these censors, including their roles and responsibilities in the processes of online news production, and how they perceive their job as censors of online content.

### **Online journalists, editors and web administrators**

Online journalists, online editors and web administrators are seen as a group of people who together are heavily engaged in the processes of online news production in the newsroom. Selection of these participants required the following criteria. Firstly, they had experience of working in online news media organisations in China. They were either registered as journalists, editors or web administrators in legitimate media organisations, and were familiar with the production process in the newsroom including handling the pressure of censorship instructions. Hence, they were capable of answering interview questions by referring to their engagement and particular examples of news production. Hence, participants could give their perspectives based on actual cases from their professional work experience rather than providing abstract concepts and generalities.

#### **4.5.3.2 Sampling**

Although the observation was conducted in Wenzhou News, some interview participants were not selected from this media organisation. There is a significant reason of broadening the range of the interviewee selection. The aim of this study is to explore and discuss issues of censorship and self-censorship in the context of China's online news industry (See *Chapter 1: 1.1 Objectives and research questions*). This thesis aims to demonstrate the protocol of online censorship in China through a review of a range of

theories and literature, and an analysis of the perspectives of censors and online news workers. The scope of the interviews is not limited to one news organisation. In addition, there are a number of nationwide news incidents such as Bo Xilai's downfall and southern media's struggle with censorship that was discussed in chapter 7: 7.4.2 and 7.5 Therefore, the scope of the research interest is set to be broader than only one city in China.

I chose "snowball sampling" (Roseneil, 1995: p.9) for the purpose of recruiting interviewees. In selecting interviewees, efforts were made to ensure that participants were varied and distinguishable. Five elements were listed as follows: gender, age, educational status, administrative status, and active work experience. This framework is inspired and developed by Roseneil (1995, p.9) who sampled with a set of four "important variables" in her study of the Greenham Common protest site.

**Gender)** Female participants were included in the sampling, but disproportionate involvement of gender is acceptable, because the majority of individuals within the institutions are male.

**Age)** The design required the researcher to ask the exact age of all participants, and place them into different age ranges from under 30, 31-40, 41-50, and above 50.

**Educational status)** According to different educational background, participants who hold diplomas or undergraduate/postgraduate degrees were selected. Effort was made to ensure the samples included one or more of these three.

**Administrative status)** Participants with or without administrative authority at work were differentiated. Most online journalists have no administrative authority. On the contrary, web administrators and cyber police operate at an administrative level. The status of editors, however, can be both administrative and journalistic and were further explicated in the detail of the pilot study.

#### **4.5.4 Interview guide**

The purpose of having an interview guide was to set a memory aide during the interview (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.109-112). In short, it is a list of questions that focuses on specific topics and guides the interview. The structure of an interview guide contains four parts: the introduction, opening questions, key questions, and closing questions. In order to give an example, an interview guide from the pilot study is attached (See appendix C).

An introduction is basically a reminder for the interviewer. It tells the interviewer to raise the introductory points to the participant at the beginning of the interview (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.112). Here, this part includes a short self-introduction, the topic and the aim of the research, the envisioned outcome of the research, the outline of the interview, the prospective length of time of the interview, and some additional ethical issues, such as the endorsement of the participant and consent sheet. The sheet establishes permission to audio record the interview, treat statements with confidentiality, ensure the anonymity of the data and highlights additional procedures for data protection (See Appendix B). For the purpose of establishing context about the participant and building rapport, after the introductory stage, the guide includes some easy-going questions for the participant. These questions are about age, occupation, educational level, and general questions about the background of the respondent, so the interviewee feels comfortable in the interview setting (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.113).

Following the introduction, some opening questions were asked to build more rapport with the interviewee. Questions here are broadly related to the nature of the interviewee's



occupation in general. Opening questions continually helped the interviewee to feel comfortable. This part bridged the introduction to key questions where the most serious and most important topics were discussed.

Key questions are designed to collect core information (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.113). A rapport needs to be established at this stage between the two parties in the interview. Depending on different sets of interviewees, these questions are related to their personal experiences and perspectives on and experience of censorship in China on particular online news incidents. Additionally, some other aspects were covered including the development of the instruments of Internet censorship, and expanding discussions on how they saw prospects for changes in the online free speech environment.

However, the prior setting does not mean that the sequence of the interview questions cannot be changed or revised in the process of interviewing. As Hennink, Hutter & Bailey (2011: 116-7) suggested, the order setting should be convenient to the interviewee rather than the researcher. Moreover, the quality of the data may be jeopardised if questions are inappropriately structured and are not logically presented to the interviewees.

The closing questions are designed for the purpose of reducing the rapport and disconnecting the two parties. They address the importance of this 'fade out' process being ethical and not leaving the interviewee in "an emotionally vulnerable state or with painful memories" (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.113-4), especially when dealing with sensitive issues, such as the experience of being censored, banned, or forbidden, as is the matter of this project. The questions are broader and more general, related to the

topic of the research. And if it is necessary, this part may even include some considerations on the prospective development of censorship on the Internet.

The questions in the in-depth interviews are short, clear and open (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.118-9). A short and clear question minimizes the possibility of confusion about the key points for the interviewee. And an open question enables the interviewee to expand upon their personal experiences of or perspectives on Internet censorship, and not simply by responding with yes or no. Furthermore, a series of topical probes, which are noted with each question, can remind the interviewer to ask certain issues of interest if the interviewee does not raise them (See Appendix C).

#### **4.5.5 Strategies and considerations in conducting interviews**

A successful interview demands careful attention to its strategies and different stages of the process. The first of these stages is preparing for the interview beforehand. Attentive preparation involves two considerations: the preparation of the interviewer, which has been expounded in the interview guide, and the preparation of the interviewees. It is essential to ensure that the empirical data can be collected thoroughly in a way that no important details are missing, and at the same time that the interview is able to be conducted in a way in which both parties feel comfortable with a thorough consideration of interviewing techniques as well as ensuring reliable methods of recording and transcribing.

Preparation of the interviewees is equally important in the design of the interview guide. The preparation of the interviewees requires attention to two phases. Firstly, a formal letter of invitation is required to be sent to each interviewee before the interview. The

content of the letter is similar to the introduction in the interview guide. It includes a brief introduction to the research and the aim of the interview, the use of the data, the methods of recording, the duration of the session, responses to concerns about confidentiality and ethical issues, and enclosed names of the interviewer and supervisor (see Appendix A). The difference between the invitation and the interview guide is that the letter is a clarification for the respondents rather than a reminder for the interviewer.

Secondly, an interviewee should be contacted initially a few days before the meeting. After sending the letters, a few days preparation are required for the interviewees. This period allows them to recall the details of events that happened in the past such as the establishment of the Golden Firewall which takes the interviewee back more than ten years. A preliminary discussion may be required for the purpose of reassuring the interviewee that his/her perspective and experience of Internet censorship are valuable. During this phase, a necessary reassertion of confidentiality and research ethics may take place if the interviewee expresses concern about commenting on sensitive topics.

#### ***4.5.5.1 Interviewing techniques***

Attention to a number of interviewing techniques is vital for the process of the interview. To obtain the qualitative data in a way that the respondent feels comfortable with, the interviewer will be keen to manage the process with well-established rapport. Ensuring rapport with the interviewee should be partly achieved beforehand, as elaborated above, and it is an ongoing task during the process of the interview.

Furthermore, the use of interviewing skills is highly important in the process, and it can reflect on the quality of data and influence the outcome of the research. Skilful control of

time is demanded. It is suggested that a successful interview is one in which the statements of the interviewee heavily outweigh those of the interviewer (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Further attention must be paid to the strategy of asking questions, for the sake of the interviewer. Questions should be asked in a non-directive way. Dealing with sensitive topics such as censorship and freedom of speech, it is always worth probing the motivations of the interviewee carefully at certain points. Rannikko (2010, pp.288-97) planned a full set of questions, opening, emphasis and closing points, in his study of online participatory journalism as a mode of civic engagement to ensure that every aspect and risk could be considered in preparation.

#### ***4.5.5.2 Instruments***

With prior permission from the interviewees (See Appendix B), the conversations were recorded with an audio recorder. The reasons for using electronic recording are that, firstly, it ensures the empirical data is properly recorded and in a way allows both parties to retrieve. The second reason is that, audio recording can make both parties relax in the process of interviewing and focus on the flow of the conversation by freeing the interviewer from mere note-taking. However, brief note taking is still required during the course of the conversation. It helped the interviewer either to emphasise and clarify for the later process of transcribing, or to develop further questions according to the answers given by the respondents.

After the interview, audio recording needs to be transcribed and translated as soon as possible as the interviewer's memory of the interview may be distorted as time passes. Transcription and translation were carried out by the interviewer, who was familiar with

the data. During the processes of transcribing and translating, this familiarity was increased.

#### **4.5.6 Pilot study**

To further enhance the quality of interviewing, a pilot interview was conducted with a suitable candidate. With the help of a critical assistant, the pilot study aims to rehearse and familiarise oneself with the procedure, and to foreshadow any difficulties (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011: p.120).

In the arrangement of location and seating, the situations are diverse. For most journalists and editors, and a few web administrators, the interviews are preferably conducted in casual places, such as coffee bars or restaurants. Seating in a private or semi-private room in a casual place with a few thoughtful light refreshments will help the interviewer create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. However, for most politicians and some web administrators, due to their professional background and work environment, the interviews may necessarily take place in their offices. Predictably, a table or a desk may be set between both parties in order to have distance between them. Here, creating a slightly formal atmosphere can enhance the credibility of both parties. After all, it is preferable to have the interviewees choose the interview location. It can eventually help the interviewees to establish the right mood and to share their thoughts in a place where they feel both safe and comfortable.

#### 4.5.7 Limitations

Kvale (1996, p.284- 291) summarises several critiques of qualitative interviews targeted against qualitative research. Some of them need to be highlighted as they are highly relevant to this study, e.g. unreliable, biased, not generalisable, and individualistic. He and others also argue that these limitations are unavoidable, as an interview is the product of an active, “contextually grounded process between interviewer and subject governed by power dynamics between researcher and researched” (Kvale, 1996, p.126; Wengraf, 2001: p.2-15).

However, Yin (2009) suggests the use of multiple sources of evidence, in his term, triangulation, to minimise the affect of bias data. In order to validate the data collected, Chen (2011) applied triangulation at two levels:

*“[...]one of which has to do with factual data, where the researcher is capable of verifying the data, while the other concerns situations where the researcher can compare data with other sources without being able to truly triangulate it” (Chen, 2011:p.66).*

One of the difficulties in conducting comparisons of online censorship is that, for a researcher, the chance of accessing uncut or uncensored news content is low. On most occasions, it is impractical to access the uncut or uncensored version of a news draft. On other occasions, such as blogging and microblogging, if the web administrators or bloggers decided to delete the news content, it would require massive effort to recover it. The sampling process for comparison, in this sense, would be slow and ineffective. And for this reason, I abandoned the original discourse analysis plan of comparing different versions of news drafts with the final public version.

## 4.6 Ethics

To ensure the interviewees' personal safety and to avoid other unexpected problems, all interviewees appeared anonymously. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, interviewees had to be guaranteed personal safety in participating in this project. Therefore, keeping interviewees anonymous allows the researcher to "actively protect the identity of research participants" (King & Horrocks, 2010: p.117; Byrne, 2004) even though it can limit the credibility of the data collected (Ong, 2003: p.94). In a similar situation, in Chen's study on the politics of democratisation and independent communications regulator in transitional Taiwan (Chen, 2011: p.71-72), respondents remained anonymous as it was believed that to reveal the identity might affect the interviewees. Therefore, all transcripts are marked with reference numbers and sorted in chronological order.

All participants in this study, including the eight interviewees and observation participants were treated equally and anonymously. Participants were asked to sign the consent form (an example of the consent form is given in Appendix B) and agreed on the terms and conditions of participating in this study before the beginning of every investigation. Participants had performed professionally throughout the process of investigation. Furthermore, in the processes of data gathering and analysing, the researcher strictly adhered to the ethical requirements of the University of Sheffield, the organisation to which this research is being submitted.

## 4.7 Analysis

As stated in 4.4.1, the aims of observing an online newsroom are to obtain data on the dynamics of online news production and to provide exploratory support for interviews. Thus, observation is important because without it, interviews with online news workers would be merely individual, and would face limitations such as being unreliable, biased, and individualistic (Kvale, 1996: pp.284-91). The aim of using in-depth interviews, as stated in 4.5.1, is to gather data from online news workers and cyber police officers on their experiences of and perspectives on online news censorship. Here, the effect of bias data was minimised by relying on multiple sources of evidence, establishing, what Yin (2009) calls triangulation. In this research design, neither of these two methods can be isolated. Observation was used to provide an exploratory stage for interviews and to better understand the workflow within the online newsroom. Hence, it is important to employ combined methods to increase reliability (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000: pp.336-350).

The key findings from the results of the study are fundamental in understanding and providing a description and analysis of the environment of censorship and self-censorship of the online news media in China. They also provide empirical evidence of censorship from the Chinese publicity authorities, and censorship policies and self-censorship among the newsroom in online news media.

Thematic analysis is used as the conceptual tool in this research to utilize the data. This qualitative approach was informed by Schutz's theory of social phenomenology (1970) as both a philosophical framework and a methodology. (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2008; Schutz 1970; Schäffner, 2004) Social phenomenology is interpreted by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2008: pp.81-2) as a descriptive and interpretive theory of social action



that “explores subjective experience within the taken-for-granted, ‘commonsense’ world of the daily life of individuals”. Thematic analysis is chosen for this research because themes of censorship of online news media that emerged during the process of data collecting and analysing, including the hierarchies of online news and cyber police, protocols of online censorship and different levels of mechanisms of online news censorship, are identified through what Rice and Ezzy (1999) described as “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (1999: p.258). The data that describes the activities of operationalisation of online censorship within the processes of online news production are interpreted through a form of pattern recognition where these emerging themes above become the categories for analysis. This fits the definition of thematic analysis by Daly, Kellehear and Gliksman (1997) as being important to the description of the phenomenon for aspects of individual experience and social relationships.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) indicate that the process of interpretive analysis involves both inductive and deductive approaches. Thus, Stone (2011) processes his analytical activities to “move from description to explanation, as well as from explanation to description” (2011: p. 37). Likewise, for this study, the interpretive analysis is projected to be a similar process.

The analytical activities were taken to interact between research design and data collection (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Bearing in mind that analysis was not separated from other features of the study, I did prompt analysis while collecting data during the fieldwork. In addition, analysing and writing-up are also inseparable, as writing-up social research is a “way of knowing” as well as a method of discovery (Richardson, 1994; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996: p.109). Therefore, this study was punctuated with consistent analytical activities.

At the stage of the empirical research, which comprises non-participant observations and interviews, I employed the strategy of thematic analysis to aid the “comprehension of interpretive processes involved within the qualitative context” (Stone, 2011 p.38).

## **4.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the research questions and the design of observation and interviews have been detailed. Also the aim of this research, to provide a coherent description and analysis of the environment of censorship and self-censorship of the online news media in China, was clarified across three focal areas. They are, examining the mechanisms of control which impact upon how the Chinese online news media experience censorship, describing and analysing how Chinese online news media formulate and practise their own editorial policy in order to comply with the demands of the authorities, and how editors and journalists who work in the Chinese online media experience, adapt and respond to China’s approach to media censorship and control.

By reviewing and referencing the previous analogous studies, the research philosophy is introduced. Fundamentally, the perspective of interpretivism underpins this research, as the research questions revealed an interpretivistic analysis of empirical data of censorship and self-censorship in the online news media in China. Key principles of grounded theory are adopted, and the data from the exploratory fieldwork and interviews were systematically gathered and analysed through an explicitly defined research process (Bryman, 2004: p.4).

Furthermore, this chapter illustrates a framework with explicit details for the different stages of exploratory fieldwork, interviewing, data collecting, and analysis and discussion. This part contains the rationale and strategy for observation and interviews respectively.

The next chapter will introduce the context of online censorship in China from a number of aspects. This will include the first level of construction of online news censorship, the use of the Great Firewall and pre-installment of software, dispute between the Chinese government and Google, drastic social turbulence in 2008 when China started to lift the bans on foreign websites, social engagement and debates on online news content via Weibo, and historical and economic reviews of southern media which were considered as frontier liberalists in the journalistic field against administrative interference from the Chinese authorities. By doing so, the discussion of the environment of free speech and free press in China provides the background to online censorship within a political and historical context, and draws attention to significant parts of the construction of protocols of this online news censorship.

# Chapter 5 Data & Analysis 1: Chinese Cyber Police

## 5.1. Introduction

This chapter addresses the issues of the Chinese cyber police force in the following respects. Firstly, it looks at the cyber police's functions and their institutional role in censorship of the Internet in China. It discusses the jurisdiction, recruitment processes, and anonymity of the Chinese cyber police. It also defines the notion of '*harmony of the Internet*', a phrase that was used repeatedly throughout the process of observation and interviews. The concept of keeping the "harmony of Internet" sustains the control of cyber police. Secondly, it discusses the systematic protocols of censorship for the online news media. The analysis continues to identify how the cyber police force imposes surveillance of the Internet and the online news media, using Internet control methods, such as collaborations with the publicity departments and filtering online news content to fulfil its administrative responsibilities. Lastly, the chapter concludes by discussing how the online news users are monitored and sanctioned, and the strategies that the cyber police use in filtering and censoring the online news content that appears to users. Overall, by discussing the role of cyber police and their influence on the process of online news production, this chapter argues that the existence of cyber police in the background adds to the sense that Chinese online news workers are required to conform to appropriate norms of behaviour.

This chapter intends to answer the following questions by decoding and analysing interviews with the cyber police officers:

- 1) What are the cyber police's functions, jurisdictions and administrative responsibilities?
- 2) What role do the Chinese cyber police play in the mechanism of Internet censorship in China?
- 3) How do the cyber police filter, monitor and censor the content that is produced by the online news media in China?
- 4) How are Chinese Internet users monitored, and what are the potential risks of being sanctioned?

By interviewing two Chinese cyber police officers, this chapter contributes to the study of Internet censorship in China from a censor/insider's perspective. It looks at how Internet censorship is conceptualised by those who censor, what the censors say they do, and why they do it. It is, therefore, important to define the notion of 'harmony of the Internet' which is seen by the Chinese authorities as the most significant motivation for Internet censorship.

## **5.2. Framework**

The interview transcripts are being used for two purposes in this chapter: firstly, to describe the roles and responsibilities of the cyber police and secondly, to describe and understand their perceptions and experiences of their role. This is a crucial distinction as the former can be presented without the subjects' input while the latter is what is crucially valuable for this analysis. As such, this chapter attempts to separate two types of material:

that which can be gleaned from other sources and the perspectives of the interviewees themselves.

The perceptions and experience of the interviewees, which reflect what the cyber police officers think and experience, will be quoted and marked directly or indirectly from the transcripts. The other material, such as the actual facts about their roles and responsibilities, will be supported with evidence and references.

### **5.2.1 Interviewees**

The analysis and quotations in this chapter are based on interviews with two cyber police officers. The interviews were conducted in February and March 2013 after agreeing on anonymity for the participants' benefit. The outline of the interview transcripts can be found in Appendix E. The two participants are labelled P05 and P07 according to the sequential time when the interviews were conducted. In the text, they are also distinguished by their ranks and the names of their positions in the public security division. P05 was one of the Directors of the Department of Network and Information Security (NIS), Bureau of Public Security of Zhejiang. He is also known as *the director* in the text. P07 was a lower-ranked cyber police officer in the Bureau of Public Security of Jinhua. He is known as *the officer*.

Both interviewees gave their full consent to the disclosure of information in this chapter. The coded names and their positions are used in the text for ethical reasons. In *Chapter 3: Methodology*, I highlighted that one of the most important reasons to use coded names for interviews was to protect the identities of interviewees. (See details of anonymity and ethical considerations in *Chapter 3: 5.5.3 Ethics*.) However, some basic introductory

context to interviewees, such as their occupation, ranks and duties, is necessary, as this context contributes to the credibility and reliability of the data.

### **5.2.2 Thematic outline**

It is crucial to this study to have a clear picture of the mechanisms of censorship in China. The cyber police are subordinate to the public security system (Chen, 2015; Southern Weekend, 2015). They are defined as a force which is in charge of fighting against Internet crimes, monitoring online user generated content, and operating the firewalls (Zhang, 2014; Southern Weekend 2015). As such, the cyber police are the second filter for the content that the online news media and Internet users produce, and they have the power to amend the online news, and sanction users who do not conform to the prescribed protocols. Its institutional mechanism and systematic censorship protocol can, therefore, be expected to have enormous influence on the behaviour of the online news media and users.

The news content produced by the Chinese online news journalists is intended forat three types of “audiences”, and these “audiences” may access the news content sequentially: news supervisors, online editors and web administrators, the government and the Communist Party, and the public. Within the newsroom, the news supervisors amend and alter the news content together with the online journalists, in order to produce the news that ensure the safe mediating of information in the context of censorship (Tong, 2009). A number of tactics (Tong, 2009) may be used at this stage of the process (see details and examples of the use of “guerrilla tactics” in online news media in *Chapter 6: 4.4*). The firewall of the cyber police, according to the interviewees’ descriptions, can detect and flag suspicious online news content which the system estimates as “may-cause-trouble”.

This highlighted content will be manually considered for censorship by the cyber police, who may decide whether to delete or ban this content based on their judgement.

This chapter consists of three main themes, after a preliminary layout of the mechanism of censorship in China. It first explores the functions of the cyber police. By reviewing and mapping their institutional structure, jurisdiction, and recruitment requirements, the roles and responsibilities of the cyber police are demonstrated. The recruitment criteria are also reviewed with an extracted list of requirements (see Appendix: F). The list demonstrates that the cyber police officers are required to be physically fit for their job, and mentally able to understand their institutional role and the need for obedience. They are also required to be politically sensitive and cautious about disclosure, as they distance themselves from personal use of smart phones and social networks to avoid exposure of their own personal information.

The second theme of this chapter is to further explore the cyber police's roles and responsibilities in overseeing and censoring online news media in China. It discusses the notion of "harmony of the Internet" in the context of the current political climate in China, as the concept of harmony is key to the political agenda of the Chinese government and the Party (Chen, 2014; Winfield & Peng, 2005). The purpose of maintaining harmony on the Internet is to stabilise the leadership of the Communist Party, (Hu, 2007; Zhu, 2010) and for this reason, online content is mechanically and manually overseen, filtered and censored by the cyber police. In the cyber police's words, *malicious* content ("anti-nation or anti-Party content" as P05 interpreted) has to be filtered and eliminated.



The attitude and protocol of censoring online news media is discussed. Since both officers have the same administrative ranking, the cyber police communicate and coordinate with the online news media in the process of overseeing online news content, rather than being instructive or dictatorial. The publicity departments, a third party that play a significant role in this process, are also explored as they are responsible for overseeing the online news content. Together with the cyber police, publicity departments press the online news media and influence the outcome of online news content in China.

The third theme of this chapter is to explore how cyber police control the activities of Internet users in China and how decisive/manipulative cyber police are in influencing the news content that users can access. The protocol of controlling online users has three stages: 1) censoring and filtering, 2) verification and investigation, and 3) sanctions. The sanctions are the main method which the cyber police employ to punish users who violate the regulations of the Internet, for example, bypassing the firewall or accessing banned online content. These acts may be treated as crimes (Liang & Lu, 2010). Lastly, this section concludes with discussions of the issues of privacy violation of users in the process of online censorship, and the cyber police's strategies for identifying, controlling, and regulating users.

### **5.3. Functions of the cyber police**

The cyber police are occasionally known as the Internet supervisors, or IT squad (Yan, 2010; Yang, 2015). This type of police force, which is acknowledged by the public as a special police force, was institutionalised at the beginning of the massive growth of the Internet in China in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Netease, 2008). This section reveals

the functions of the cyber police, in order to ground the discussion in a firm understanding of its systematic protocols. The institutional functions and roles can further explain the mechanism of Internet control and the institutional pressures that force the online news media to censor its news content. In addition, the cyber police monitor the online activities of Internet users in China, and filter and censor the online content that these users can access. The cyber police's background of being a sub-division of the public security system also gives them power to sanction users who attempt to bypass the firewall and access banned content.

This section depicts the framework of China's governmental system, namely the institutional structure and ranking system in the Chinese government. It then pinpoints where the cyber police fit in this institutional structure. Having established this understanding of the structure of the administrative aim of state censorship, I look at the characteristics of the cyber police from a number of different aspects, including recruitment processes, requirement for anonymity, and special regulations in censoring operations.

### **5.3.1 Institutional structure and jurisdiction**

There are 27 levels of administrative rank in the Chinese government. The highest rank is the state-leader level; the President and the Premier are both ranked at this level. The lowest rank is the 27<sup>th</sup>; most junior clerks are at this level. Table 2 shows the construction of different ranks in the Chinese government and where the Public Security Bureau and cyber police sit within the hierarchical system.

Table 2 Administrative ranking of the main sectors of the Public Security and cyber police in the Chinese government

Rank	Administrative level	Post example(s) in Central Public Security	Post example(s) in local Public Security
Rank 1	State-Leader level		
Rank 2 to 4	Vice-State-Leader level		
Rank 4 to 8	Ministerial (Provincial) level	Minister of the Public Security, Ministry of the State Councilor	
Rank 6 to 10	Vice-Ministerial (Provincial) level	Vice ministers of the Public Security ministry of the State Councilor; director of the national bureaus of Public Information and Internet Security (cyber police) in the State Councilor	
Rank 8 to 13	Bureau-Director level	Director of the State Commission office for Safeguard Stability in State Councilor; director of the China Crime Information Center	Directors of the Public Security department of provinces, direct-controlled municipalities, and autonomous regions
Rank 10 to 15	Deputy-Bureau-Director level	Deputy directors of the State Commission office for Safeguard Stability in State Councilor; deputy directors of the China Crime Information Center	Deputy directors of the Public Security department of provinces, direct-controlled municipalities, and autonomous regions
Rank 12 to 18	Division-Head level	Division head in the departments of the national bureaus of Public Information and Internet Security (cyber police) in the State Councilor	Public Information (cyber police) division heads in the department of Public Security of provinces, direct-controlled municipalities, and autonomous regions; heads of Public Security bureaus in prefectural cities
Rank 14 to 20	Deputy-Division-Head level	Deputy division heads in the departments of the national bureaus of Public Information and Internet Security (cyber police) in the State Councilor	Public Information (cyber police) division deputy heads in the department of Public Security of provinces, direct-controlled municipalities, and autonomous regions; deputy heads of Public Security bureaus in prefectural cities
Rank 16 to 22	Section-Head level		Public Information (cyber police) section heads of the Public Security bureaus in prefectural cities; heads of Public Security bureaus in counties
Rank 17 to 24	Deputy-Section-Head level		Public Information (cyber police) section deputy heads of the Public Security bureaus in prefectural cities; deputy heads of Public Security bureaus in counties

Rank 18 to 26	Senior Public Information officer		Senior cyber police of Public Information (cyber police) in prefectural cities; team leader of Public information (cyber police) in counties
Rank 19 to 27	Junior Public Information officer		Junior cyber policemen

In the public security system, the cyber police department and technology department are parallel, but with different sets of policemen. The technology department recruits technicians, who are in charge of data gathering and technical support, whereas the cyber police department recruits implementers, whose responsibility is to analyse and execute.

The cyber police department is subordinate to the public security system in China. The cyber police department falls within the jurisdiction of the higher-division of its public security bureau, while the administrative level of the cyber police department is ranked one level lower than its bureau. For example, in a public security bureau, whose administrative rank is *section-head level*, the cyber police department in the bureau is ranked as *deputy-section-head level*; whoever has an administrative rank as *division-head level*, has a cyber police department ranked as *deputy-division-head level*.

The cyber police receive their instructions directly from their supervisors in the public security bureau. Like other civil servants, the cyber police officers are obliged to follow instructions from their supervisors. The officer (P07) specifically addressed his understanding of ‘serve and obey’. Here, he explains his work routine:

*“I attend meetings and arrest people. [...] We have meetings in our bureau several times a week, regularly or irregularly. Giving and receiving instructions, alerting the virus attacks, and updating domain controls” (P07).*

The statement above suggests that the cyber police's duty is remarkably similar to other kinds of police force. They have obligations to receive and obey instructions from their supervisors, to attend meetings and briefings, and to participate in operations. However, it is worth noting that the cyber police officers specified that they normally take little part in technical work, such as information gathering and IP tracking. This type of work is, usually, led by the parallel technology department. The technology department, which is also known as the IT department, is usually in charge of technical support for cyber police and other departments in the public security system.

Both cyber police participants were frank about the topic of the IT department, as they both admitted that they were not experts in IT technology. For example, the officer (P07) indicated that they need to collaborate with the IT departments on a daily basis, in order to work efficiently:

*“We had technicians in our office and they solved technical problems. I was not an expert. The community LANs were what we were busy with on most occasions. And they would also be responsible for building up LAN firewalls for schools, preventing them from virus attacks” (P07).*

Likewise, the director (P05) distinguished his institutional responsibilities from technical support in terms of what he referred to as ‘supervising’ and ‘executing’ for the benefit of the harmonious atmosphere of the Internet:

*“This task requires a conjunction team to work with the technical department. [...] We unify them (websites) as a whole, monitoring and updating its firewall, preventing attacks, and tracking the suspicious IPs” (P05).*

A plausible reason for the research observation that the cyber policemen spoke without inhibition is that the implementation of technology was insensitive compared with other

aspects of their institutional responsibilities. As the result, they appeared cautious when they were asked to reveal their administrative responsibilities, but less guarded in discussing the technical methods that had been used in the process of online surveillance.

The discussion around cyber police's jurisdictions, duties, and work ethics contributes to an understanding of its function, and also to the construction of online censorship within the broader picture, which will illustrate and situate the censorship mechanism of Chinese online news. The setting-up of Internet censors is important to the operationalisation of the model of different censorship levels (Chapter 1: 1.2.5), which need both technology and manual processes to function in a combined manner. Furthermore, clarifying the cyber police's administrative rankings in the public security system and the government helps this study explain within which organisational structures the authorities reinforce their control over online news. As Zhao (1998) and de Burgh (2003) have argued, news media organisations in China were constructed in a way that ensures the authorities can influence the output of news content. Arguably, the setting-up of Internet censors has the same function. It allows the authorities to have a group of specialised implementers who are ranked in the governmental sectors, overseeing news content on the Internet.

### **5.3.2 Recruitment**

Most cyber police officers are recruited by the public security system when they graduate from the police schools. But not every graduate has specialised in the relevant IT skills. The recruitment criteria vary in different cities and provinces, but they share some basic standards relating to physical fitness and political background (see Appendix F). A normal recruitment process for a citizen to become a local cyber policeman has six stages: recruitment examination in the police schools, registration of the police schools, literary

examination, physical tests, interviews, and political background verification (Sina, 2008b; Guangzhou Net, 2014).

The recruitment process of the cyber police demonstrates the fact that IT expertise is not a primary consideration for cyber police officers. In other words, cyber police officers are not required to possess high-end IT techniques and become Internet experts. Some candidates do not voluntarily choose the cyber police as their career path. After their graduation from the police schools, they are assigned to their cyber police posts. And some of them, according to the interviewees, may be reassigned out of the posts due to different administrative demands. The officer (P07) explained his assignment as follows:

*“I graduated in 99 from police school and I was recruited as a criminal investigation police officer. But I was assigned to my current department 4 years ago. And I have been a cyber policeman ever since” (P07).*

The reason that I discuss the recruitment process is that the process itself allows reflections on the type of personnel required for the role. Unlike their technologically-oriented-colleagues in the technology department, cyber police officers are recruited through athletic-oriented criteria (see 3, 4e, 4f, and 4g), institutional-oriented criteria (2 and 3), and political-oriented criteria (4a and 6). The institutional and political criteria indicate that the cyber police are required to be intellectually able to understand their institutional responsibilities and obedience before their recruitment. These are the characteristics that the cyber police officers explained in their role as agents in the process of censorship of the Internet.

### 5.3.3 Anonymity

Gaining access to cyber police interviewees was difficult from the start of the interviewing process, as there was insufficient communication beforehand. For example, the director (P05) was difficult to communicate with by email and phone. He chose his words carefully and avoided discussing topics in detail before the formal interview started. During the latter stages of the interview, he explained his cautiousness as follows:

*“[...] you have to forgive me that I didn’t talk too much on the phone to you. [...] it’s just what I do. I communicate in the same way with my family as well, [...] because every time you use an electronic device, you leave your trails, and people with technical expertise can dig you out” (P07).*

Before the face-to-face interviews, the cyber police participants reacted in an evasive way due to the privacy threat that the Internet presents. The risk of disclosing their personal information, as they interpreted, could cause trouble and jeopardize their political careers.

P05 further explained his approach of distancing online disclosure as follows:

*“I don’t use QQ or Weibo. [...] When I see many officials signing up to their accounts on Weibo, uploading their pictures and tweeting their thoughts, some using WeChat for vocal chatting, I think that can be dangerous. If some of them can be completely off these apps, they might avoid a lot of risks and scandals” (P05).*

Apparently, the cyber police intentionally chose to be excluded from social networks on the Internet. For the cyber police, the acts of civil servants who embrace social networks and trust Internet technology can be seen as ‘dangerous’ for their political careers. Both participants appeared to slow the pace of their speech and choose words more carefully when they discussed their personal involvement on social networks. I concluded that the function of cyber police work made this necessary. As mentioned earlier, cyber police



officers tend to be vigilant and politically sensitive, but not enthusiastic about new technology and media change.

Cyber police are cautious about their personal activities on the Internet. They barely participate in online social networks, and they normally do not have personal accounts for these social networks websites or apps. By acting in this way, they are convinced that the risk of disclosure can be lowered. The participants' attempts at keeping themselves away from Internet social networks indicates their fear of the damage of disclosure to their political careers. It is, though, difficult to be certain that these acts of distancing were self-motivated. However, the participants had shown their evasive attitude towards social networks, as they are self-estimated as a group of people who understand thoroughly that Internet social networks can trigger disclosure of personal identity and exposure of privacy. For instance, the P05 explains his attitude as follows:

*“The more advanced a device is, the more dangerous it can be. You take a picture on your mobile, and upload it on the Internet, Weibo, Twitter [...] And if somebody wants to find you, they can find you even if you delete it later. Now some smart phones are designed in a way that you cannot remove the batteries, [...] you thought you disconnected the Wi-Fi and you didn't upload it (pictures). But I can still find you, we have technology which can track you down and bring up your picture. Your phone records, messages, everything” (P05).*

According to their description, they had witnessed a number of incidents when civil servants found themselves in trouble when they were personally too close to online social life, as their personal information was exposed from their personal accounts on social networks. These social network accounts, and the personal information within them, can cause civil servants to become vulnerable on the Internet because they allow other users to search and review their personal life. The cyber police are aware of how fragile a person's privacy can be on the Internet if his or her identity and other personal information

are disclosed. From their technical perspective, every trace that users have left on the network can be tracked. The disclosure of identity, as both participants admitted, no longer required high-end hacker techniques. It means the chances for users to counter-monitor the activities of cyber police have risen, which P05 also admitted was not in the cyber police's favour. This would explain the cyber police's evasive attitude towards their personal and private involvement on social networks.

Furthermore, cyber police participants tended not to use smart phones, or to send texts and pictures via mobile networks, for the same reasons - that they object to social network websites and apps. The cyber police share a common belief that technology discloses, and the more advanced technology is, the more it discloses. Cyber police's treatment of mobile devices is particularly contradictory to the demands and nature of their work. Their job responsibilities require of them to use the Internet, yet in their personal and daily social life they choose to distance themselves from the Internet. Cyber police are fearful of disclosure and attempt to "keep a low profile" (P05 and P07). By doing so, they minimise the potential risks of jeopardising their careers. The discussion on cyber police's treatment of mobile devices, therefore, leads them to fear having their activities on social media monitored. Here, the crucial questions are: How seriously can the cyber police officers' careers be jeopardized if their personal information is disclosed on the Internet? Or, what would the consequences of disclosure on the Internet be for a cyber police officer?

To answer these questions, I go back to the table of public security administrative rankings, and cross reference them with the Chinese culture of official circles and civil servants. It is worth noting that 'keeping-a-low-profile' is one of the unwritten workplace rules for Chinese civil servants. Cyber police, who are essentially civil servants, also obey the 'keeping-a-low-profile' rule to protect their anonymity.

In the context of Chinese culture, ‘keeping-a-low-profile’ shares similarities with *humble* and *modest* behaviour, two characteristics which many Chinese civil servants worship. ‘Keeping-a-low-profile’ contains a number of meanings that *humble* and *modest* stand for, such as meekness in behaviour and attitude, submissive respect, unpretentious behaviour, and freedom from showiness and ostentation. The value of being a humble and modest person can be traced back to Confucius, who was devoted in preaching his idea that a humble man can earn respect (Makeham, 2003; De Bary, 1991). At present, in the context of the Chinese culture of official circles, ‘keeping-a-low-profile’ also has additional meanings such as staying away from the spotlight, keeping a distance from the media and the public, and avoiding scandals. Thus, the impression that Chinese civil servants are difficult to approach is commonly accepted in the Chinese news media. Hence, the cultural roots of ‘keeping-a-low-profile’ explains why cyber police officers are evasive about personal participation on social networks or use of smart phones, in order to stay away from the spotlight, and keep a distance from the media and the public.

Before and during the interviews, the participants’ conservative style was also reflected in their attitude toward electronic recordings. Both cyber police participants refused to allow leads them to fear having their activities on social media be monitored This caused difficulties for the researcher in recording their words. Extra efforts were made for the two transcripts of the cyber police officers. They were recorded by intense handwriting and the researcher’s memories, and they are the only two interviews not transcribed from electronic recordings, at the request of the participants (See details in *Chapter 3: 5.5.2 & 5.5.3*).

During the process of approaching the participants, and before interviews began, the two cyber police officers expressed their deep concerns about electronic recording, which eventually led to the decision not to use it. Both of them had taken the precaution of anonymity, though the degrees of their resistance were different. The director (P05) refused firmly and stated clearly that “no audio record must be made in the interview”, whereas the officer (P07) hesitated for a while, and then refused the use of a recorder by asking “Can we leave the recorder out?” In the interview process, despite admitting that there was no rule against police officers doing interviews, both cyber police officers brought up the anonymity issue more than once, and re-emphasised the importance of leaving their names out of the transcripts.

The influence that marketisation has had on news media and social networks is enormous, and has also had a significant impact on the way in which these Internet censors think and approach the Internet. While the cyber police officers may not exhibit the same hostile attitude towards the corruptive western capitalism as did the censors in the Cold War era in China, the awareness of and caution towards potential political threats were inherited and embedded within the structure of the government.

The caution in the disclosure also verifies the influence of media marketisation, which shifts the press’ loyalty from the authoritarian state to the market and financial advertisers (Esarey, 2005). The government officials can no longer be protected from scandals, nor can they arbitrarily interfere in the production of investigative journalism. The cautious attitude can therefore be considered a result of media supervision. This is similar to the idea of building a system that allows journalism to be critical, which Maoism had proposed before the establishment of the PRC. In this system, government officials and party members have to be supervised by the press and be self-disciplined. Although the

difference between the self-disciplining of Maoist political reformatory (Mao, 1964) and the careful treatment of political careers is distinct, they both result in, ideally, a similar political climate where media supervision is effective. Thus, this phenomenon of caution amongst Internet censors can be considered as one of the liberalising effects of marketisation on the freedom of press in China.

## **5.4. Oversight of online news media**

### **5.4.1 Administrative responsibilities of the cyber police**

The cyber police play the role of implementer of state censorship for the online news media: in their terms, to ensure and guard the safety and harmony of the Internet. To achieve this goal, cyber police filter and censor the contents that the online news media produce. This explains why, in the interviews, both cyber police participants used typical diplomatic terms such as ‘organise’, ‘supervise’, ‘guide’, ‘study and formulate regulations’, and ‘protect’ in describing their responsibilities in overseeing online news. Participants suggested that having cyber police monitoring online news media was for virtuous purposes, rather than for ideological control, or violation of free speech and free press. For example, the director (P05) explained his work as follows:

*“[...] first, we are responsible for organising, instructing and supervising our lower division’s websites [...] Second, we research, formulate and prevent... what we call online-violence incidents, and any kind of criminal activities on the Internet. And then, we are responsible for supervising and executing... for the benefit of the health of the Internet” (P05).*

Similar wording came from the officer (P07):

*“We have meetings in our bureau several times a week, regularly or irregularly. Giving and receiving instructions, alerting the virus attacks, and updating domain controls” (P07).*

I cite these kinds of diplomatic phrases as signs of the cyber police’s institutional characteristics. Cyber police are considered as the watchdog for online news media. Although it is not essential that every bit of news content that is produced by the online news media be filtered and examined by the cyber police, any content that is determined as ‘politically incorrect’ and unsuitable for publication by the cyber police may be assigned a warning, or removed. Hence, the institutional authority that the publicity administrators and the cyber police have is recognised as the external motivation for online news media’s self-censorship. The cyber police participants hold a strong belief that the most significant justification for censoring online content is to achieve the ‘harmony of the Internet’, which is seen as the origin of all the applications and state-run surveillance.

Although the Cultural Revolution, a social movement which de Burgh (2003) calls ‘destruction of journalism’, ended in the late 1970s, the construction of the propaganda mechanism is still having an impact on today’s news in China. In terms of serving the majority and the collective, Confucianism has arguably contributed to the construction of governmental surveillance and online news media. In the previous section on institutional structures, I have argued that the setting-up of cyber police within the public security system and the government ensures the authorities’ impact on the news content. The construction of cyber police allows the authorities to have implementers who are specialised in overseeing news content on the Internet. This job responsibility is not

limited to the content that has already been produced, but also extended to preventing the potentially ‘contentious’ (Petley, 2009: pp.3-4) raw material that is yet to be produced.

Overall, the institutional set-up of cyber police ensures that the pressure of censorship can be effectively transmitted through their daily practices onto online news workers, who are instructed to comply and produce *synchronised news content* (Hu, 2007). The process of pressurisation may not be commonly seen in some western models of journalism found in democratic countries, for instance, the UK and American systems. But it is now important protocol for the Chinese authorities to interfere in online news production and to set the rules for journalistic norms, by instructing the online press about what they *should* do, and sanctioning online news workers for doing what they *shouldn’t* do. This protocol is operationalised via the institutional setting of cyber police.

#### **5.4.2 Harmony of the Internet**

Participants mentioned the phrase ‘harmony of the Internet’ several times during the interviews. ‘The harmony of the Internet’ is a significant term that is widely used in describing the online news media environment in some official documents released by the government. The notion of ‘harmony of the Internet’, though it may slightly vary in different contexts, is generally defined by the media as free from rumours, malicious speech, and pornography (Wang, 2015; Xu, 2015).

The noun ‘harmony’ is an unconventional choice of word, because in the context of the Chinese language (Mandarin), it was originally used to describe the well-being of individual units’ physiological or psychological functions. The meaning of ‘harmony’ overlaps with physical health to some extent. Therefore, the word was originally used for living entities whose components are functioning effectively to fulfil their purpose: to live

or survive. Its extended meaning is also used to describe some social mechanisms or systems. For example, Chinese media often mix the use of 'healthy' and 'harmony' to describe a well-functioning social order or public opinion environment (Liu, 2014a; Wang, C. 2011). A public opinion environment which has few malicious verbal attacks and slanders is considered as being in 'harmony'. Nowadays, being in 'harmony' is more frequently used in describing the environment of the Internet.

By looking at the development of harmonisation in a historical context in China, there is significant evidence of how Confucianism was shaped, developed and integrated with the concept of harmony and of national benefit. In Mao's earlier times, he advocated criticism and self-criticism as one of his important political agendas in the Communist Party. Tong (2011: p.23) argues that this political proposition can be seen as an embracing gesture for media supervision. For the purpose of purification within the party and the government, it suggests an open and free environment for political discussion both inside and outside the party's circle. News workers were, therefore, encouraged to conduct investigative journalism and play the role of holding political power to account. But from the late 1960s, the trend shifted and liberalism was radically criticised. The political climate in China was against liberalism and a free press, which was seen as an account of corrupt thought stemming from the capitalist world, and posing a threat to the solidarity of communist comradeship. Throughout its development up until the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s and Hu Jintao in the 2000s, the need to maintain this solidarity of communist comradeship was gradually extended to outside of the party's circle. It became, in Hu's words (2007), about maintaining the harmony of the society, the news media and the Internet.



The ‘harmony of the Internet’ refers to at least two aspects. Firstly, it refers to maintaining a status in which minimal cyber virus and crimes exist. I call this status ‘functional harmony’. Functional harmony of the Internet is similar to what harmony originally refers to: well-being of units’ functions, unaffected by viruses, and different components of the whole system functioning properly to fulfil its purpose. The second aspect of the ‘harmony of the Internet’ refers to more than maintaining the Internet functionalities. In some situations, it is believed that harmony refers to stable leadership of the Communist Party, which is achieved by restricting malicious speech on the Internet (Liu, 2014a; Wang, 2011; Zhu, 2010). Therefore, the meaning of harmony extends to political content. When the director (P05) was trying to define what he understood as ‘malicious’ on the Internet, he said:

*“[T]hose anti-Party and anti-nation opinions. We have to deal with them very seriously. But many opinions are not that obvious. A lot of hatred speech seems to walk a fine line. I see much sarcasm” (P05).*

One of the significant and typical examples that can cross-verify what the director (P07) said is the infamous *Qi Bu Jiang* (also known as the *Seven forbidden topics*), leaked by Professor Zhang Xuezhong in May 2013. According to Zhang Xuezhong’s blog, (accessed on 11 May, 2013; deleted on 13 May, 2013; endorsed by a number of other academics), the *Qi Bu Jiang* was from the official announcement entitled “*Concerning the Situation in the Ideological Sphere*”. The announcement warned academics and civil servants to combat ‘dangerous’ Western values and other perceived ideological threats. It consisted of a list of appalling rules, restraining speech and forbidding topics in university lectures and on the Internet. The forbidden topics were: universal values, freedom of the press, civil society, citizenship, history of political mistakes of the Communist Party, crony capitalism, and judicial independence.

The content of the list was beneficial for the leadership of the Party in China, as these restrained topics were feared by the Party as threats to the harmony and solidarity of the Internet. For example, restraining public discussions of universal values may be beneficial for consolidating the belief of communism amongst the young people, restraining the free press may be beneficial for top-down speech control, and forbidding discussions on the political mistakes that the Party made in its history is beneficial for the image-building of the Party itself. Discussions of these topics on the Internet were considered as a threat to the harmonious atmosphere on the Internet and its relationship to the leadership of the Party. This can be linked back to Confucianism as it undermines freedom of the individual and implies that freedom of the press needs to be limited to avoid discussion of politically sensitive topics. As Petley (2009: pp.3-4) indicates, listing banned topics and works, and forbidding people from publishing and accessing them is one of the tactics that the authorities use to limit and censor the news.

In chapter 3: 3.2, I presented a detailed discussion on how the notion of morality was historically developed and revolved around Confucianism which suppressed individual freedom to serve the benefactor and the state, while chapter 3: 3.3, unpacks an explicit discussion on how this philosophical school was criticised, developed and inherited in social movements before 1949 in China. It is clear that Confucianism in contemporary China has embedded itself in the current political agenda. Overall, Confucianism is integrated with the communist political proposition. The communist account of criticism of Confucianism developed from advocating autonomy and individuality to the suppression of liberalism and free press. Despite the liberalising effect that marketisation has had on the news industry, news media is still instructed to synchronise its tone with the authority. Harmonisation is a key notion for both online and offline news workers to

keep in mind. The censors, on the other hand, ensure that the official doctrine for “constructing a modernised socialist country” (Hu, 2007) and the stability of a developing economy (Goodman, 1990; Zhang, 2011) are presented as a harmonious image in news. Other contentious news content, which may or may not cause potential political setbacks, has to be approached and filtered carefully. Hence, I conclude that the substantial purpose of censoring news content on the Internet and limiting these sensitive topics is not only to maintain the harmony of the Internet, but also works to the benefit of the leadership of the Communist Party.

### **5.4.3 Protocol of online news media censoring**

Cyber police have different attitudes in censoring the content of online news media and the ordinary Internet users who access online news content. The difference in attitudes results from having different protocols of censorship. For online news media, cyber police usually work closely with the publicity department. Cyber police may have the media involved in the censorship process by communicating and negotiating with the leaders of media organisations in various ways. The outcome of online news content, in this sense, can be seen as the product of the collaboration by the cyber police, online news media, and the publicity departments in a matrix power-flow. However, for everyday Internet users, the protocol is straightforward and less subtle (See *Chapter 5: 5*).

#### ***5.4.3.1 Attitudes to the oversight of the online news media***

Although both cyber police and online news media are steeped in an administrative top-down culture, and employers of these two organisations are accustomed to receiving top-down instructions from their supervisors and higher-ranked officials, there is no sign of direct top-down instruction-giving to the online news media by the cyber police. The

reason that the cyber police do not direct the online news media over news content is because these two organisations are ranked at the same administrative level. Insubordination is disallowed in Chinese political culture, as the institutional hierarchy is strictly adhered to and thus retains stability. This hierarchical system sets out the rule that the directives that come from a higher ranked office cannot be disobeyed by the lower ones, whilst offices at the same level cannot overrule one another. The Cyber police's attitude towards censoring the online news media is therefore determined by this political culture.

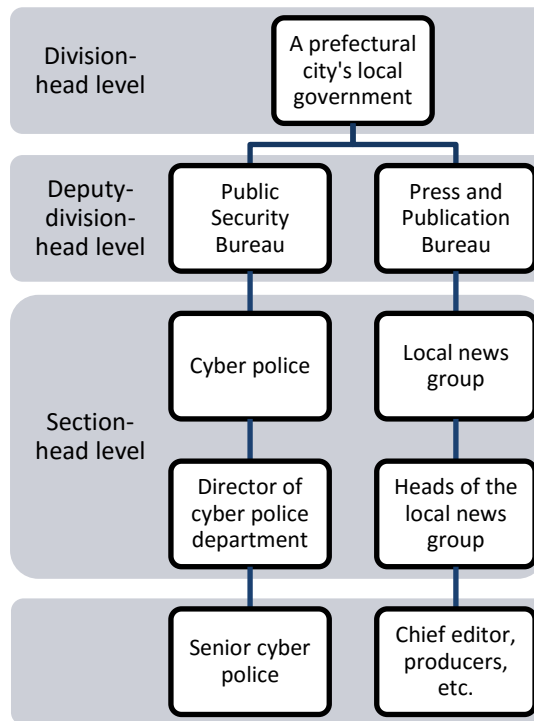


Figure 4 Administrative level comparison table of the public security system and press system in a local government

As Figure 4 shows, in local government, the public security bureau and the press and publication bureau are two parallel offices that lie under the jurisdiction of the local government, and the heads of these two bureaus are ranked at the same administrative level. To be precise, the director of the cyber police department of the public security bureau is ranked at section-head level, as well as the heads of section directors in the local

news groups of the same prefectural city. For example, in *Wenzhou News*, where the observation was conducted, the director is ranked at section-head level, equivalent to the director of the Wenzhou cyber police department. In the administrative sense, they are equipotent. By administering control over the licencing of online news media, the local government retains dominant power over the online news organisation. This type of administrative controlling corroborates the existence of one of the tactics in Chinese online news control, which Petley (2009) refers to as the licensing of the press to regulate the inclusion and exclusion of news content.

The cyber police and online news media coordinate in a way that involves negotiation and communication, as the heads of cyber police and leaders of online news media negotiate and communicate over the online news media on a regular basis. The relationship between these two parties is seemingly harmonious. The cyber police do not directly involve themselves in the process of giving instructions to the online news media, or supervising the process of online news production. The top-down instructive operations, such as instructing the online news media to delete a specific piece of news or to orientate public opinion, are given by the local government at a higher rank.

The cyber police have responsibilities in overseeing the online news content but cannot overrule the online news media or play the role of instructor who gives top-down instructions, thus the relationship between them is subtle and seemingly harmonious. There is no sign of an intense atmosphere between these two offices, as their equal administrative ranking does not allow them to overpower one another. The publicity department, as the third party that is involved in this power-flow, plays a significant role in the online news censorship. Here, the ‘publicity department’ refers to the specific department that the Communist Party runs. Unlike the governmental cyber police and

online news media, the publicity department is subordinated to the Communist Party. As the table 2 (*Chapter 5: 3.1*) and figure 5 (below) shows, the Central Commission for Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress is the highest section, whereas the local publicity offices are the lowest:

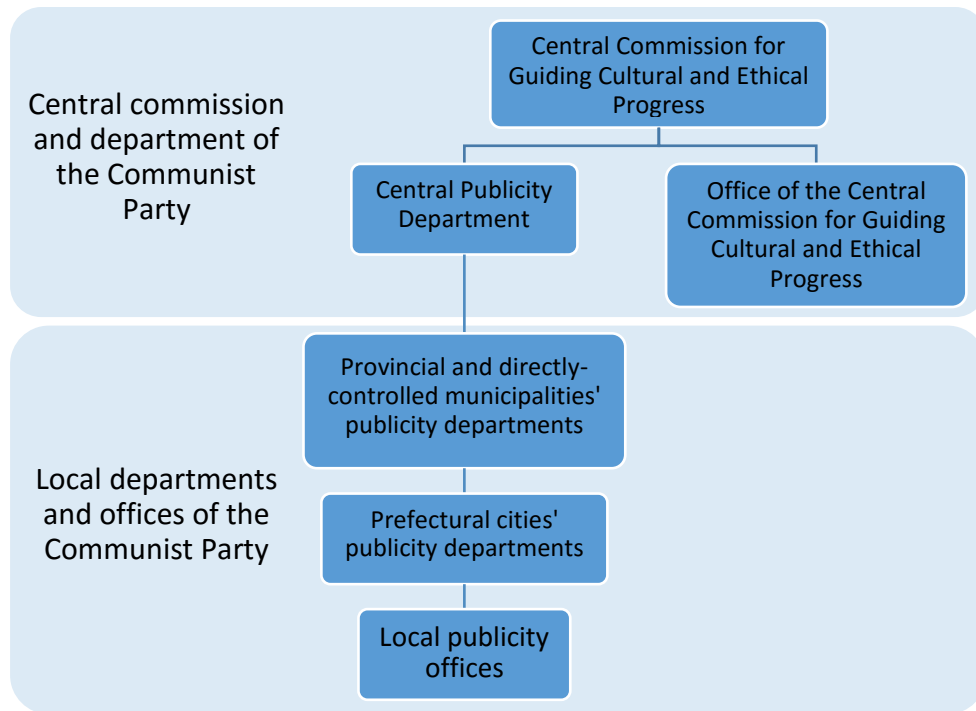


Figure 5 Institutional structures of the Communist Party's publicity commission, departments and offices

In general, the publicity department is tasked with ensuring a harmonious society. In the process of censoring online news media, it is specifically in charge of ideological control on the Internet to orientate public opinion (see *Chapter 1:5.3*), and to ensure that content produced by the online news is consistent with the interests and benefits of the party (He, 2004; He, 2008). Furthermore, it coordinates and harmonises the relationship between the cyber police and the online news media.

Hence, the harmony between the cyber police and news media can be interpreted as a consequence of Chinese political culture, in which the different governmental and Party

departments manage to build a subtle balance via administrative levels and ranking systems. This hierarchical ranking system is rigorous and rigid; all civil servants and formal employers who work in governmental organisations have their corresponding administrative levels, where insubordination is forbidden. The hierarchical ranking system determines a number of aspects of the careers of Chinese civil servants and governmental employees, such as their political influence, boundary of authority, welfare and wages, and the social etiquette and relations among them. That is, higher-ranked civil servants and governmental employees have more political influence and a more extensive boundary of authority than lower ones; they are better paid, and may have an absolute authority that cannot be opposed by their lower-ranked colleagues at work. In this political culture, any insubordination of the administration level is therefore intolerable. And for this reason, the attitude of cyber police overseeing the online news content is not straightforward and dictatorial. Rather, they are being communicative and co-ordinated. It is important to establish this understanding here, as their co-ordinated relationship in the process of online news production will be explored further in 4.3.2 of this chapter and *Chapter 7: 2*, in which the matrix amongst the publicity department, the cyber police and online news media in the censorship of online news content will be detailed.

In this sense, the way that cyber police influence the process of online news production is indirect. Due to their levelled ranking within the governmental organisation and the emphasis of Chinese political culture on being harmonious, they are in a collaborative relationship rather than a radical and hostile one. The existence of cyber police may keep reminding online news workers to “deliberately” (Horton, 2011) avoid discussing sensitive topics, but they do not participate in the process of online news production. Their job responsibilities do not include journalistic practices, for instance. Concern for journalistic professionalism, widely discussed by western schools, and focusing on values

such as objectivity, quality, legitimacy and credibility (Soloski, 1989; Drechsel, 2000; McNair, 2009; Schudson & Anderson, 2009) is not found. Thus, the existence of cyber police may influence the output of online news content in such a way that online news workers need to approach sensitive topics carefully and consider reporting them with fear or favour. However, the actual journalistic practice and the process of self-censorship have to happen within the online newsroom where cyber police are excluded.

#### ***5.4.3.2 Protocol for censoring online news content***

The protocols for censoring online news can sometimes be difficult to summarise, because the processes and outcomes of the negotiation and coordination among the cyber police and online news media vary. As already established in 4.3.1 of this chapter, the institutional background of the administrative level system in Chinese culture does not allow one office insubordinately to challenge another. Thus, there are several governmental and party sections and departments involved in the protocol matrix for censoring the online news media; and they all play significant roles in the process of communication, negotiation and concession.

An extreme case that can reflect the complexity of the process is the political unrest between March and April in 2012 in China when Bo Xilai, the disgraced Chinese politician and a former member of the Central Politburo, was dismissed, arrested and accused of murder, corruption, and treason. Massive rumours of a coup, disruption of the politburo of the CPC, and the emergence of unidentified troops in Beijing, rushed onto the Internet. Cyber police worked extremely closely with the publicity department, and issued fine tickets to the online news media which were accused of fuelling the rumour-



spreading. The director (P05) explains that this was to preserve regional stability and bolster civilian morale.

*“We gained support from websites, tracked down those criminals, located them, and finally brought them to justice. Overall, incidents as radical as this (Bo Xilai’s downfall) are rare. The most usual are where people are affected by malicious speech on the Internet... they may come to hate the government” (P07).*

Here, in the interview, significant attention is paid to the relationship between the online news media, the cyber police of the government and the publicity department of the party. And this aspect is illuminated in the process of observation, as the consistent communication of the supervisor of online news media with the publicity department and the cyber police was witnessed. In addition, the publicity administrators and cyber police officers often join the internal media briefing.

This phenomenon is intriguing because these two offices share few similarities in terms of their responsibility. The cyber police, as mentioned earlier, are a public security force of the government, which is responsible for preventing online criminal activities, whereas the publicity department is often in charge of political propaganda and dissemination of the Communist Party view. It is the pressure of keeping the Internet harmonious that brings them together at the media briefing desks. The director (P07) implied the close collaboration between these two departments in Bo Xilai’s case as follows:

*“I had an urgent meeting with Director Wu (of the publicity department of Hangzhou People’s government) and fellows from Zhejiang News Group. We discussed how we are going to deal with the scandal, because that was serious. [...] The meeting was held in Director Wu’s office, as it is always is” (P05).*

P07's statement indicated that the shared ground of responsibility in maintaining the harmonious atmosphere over the Internet is what links the cyber police and publicity department. In handling sensitive incidents like Bo Xilai's story, which involves a number of aspects that could damage the harmonious atmosphere, such as reactionary acts, the murder of an elite political figure and abuse of power, the cyber police and the publicity departments worked together to oversee the decision making in the newsrooms of the online news media. Along with their collaboration with the online news media, a three-party matrix in the power-flow of news production and news censorship was therefore constructed. The dynamic interactions and responsibilities among the online news media, cyber police and publicity departments can be illustrated, as Figure 6 shows:

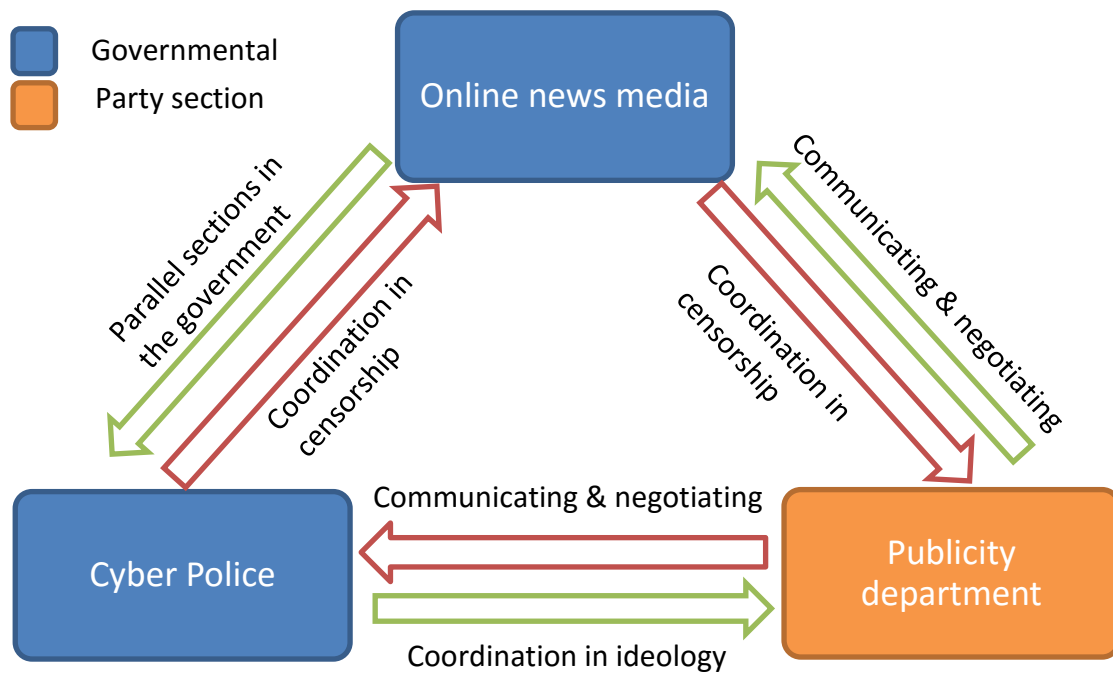


Figure 6 Dynamic interactions among the online news media, cyber police and publicity department  
The online media coverage of Bo Xilai's case can be interpreted in the sense that high pressure from the publicity department and the cyber police forced the online news media to avoid producing news content that is incongruent to the interests of the authorities,

because the cyber police force are not entitled to pursue this task on their own as they are parallel offices with the online news media. Here, the publicity department has two main responsibilities in incidental news reporting. First, the publicity administrator is responsible for ensuring ideological control over the news media. That is, the publicity administrator is expected to deliver clear and specific requirements to the online news media and the cyber police are expected to regulate news coverage and delineate taboos to avoid, control news story angle, and how best to censor users' comments. Secondly, the publicity administrators support the cyber police to regulate the online news media according to these requirements. In this sense, the publicity department is the coordinator, whereas the cyber police are the implementer.

In extreme cases like Bo Xilai's, if news workers did not have an awareness of latent rules that warned them away from the minefield in the news, they might drag down the websites which they worked for. It is the authority of the government and the Party that forces the news workers to self-censor their news content carefully.

As implementers in the process, the cyber police issue online news media fine tickets and announce other sanctions. In extreme cases involving sensitive political issues or ideology control, they again need to collaborate with the publicity department to discipline online news media. The administrative disciplines can cause news media and their websites huge political pressure and financial loss. For example, the political prospect of the online news media's director and chief editor would be affected because they are normally party members. The administrators of the *Southern Weekly* were forced to compromise and were re-staffed by the authorities during its planning strike (Cao, 2013). Also, if a website was forced to close down, it would cause the failure of its commercial contracts and result

in financial loss. Hence, together with the publicity department, the cyber police have a certain administrative deterrence that the online news media cannot ignore or provoke.

A phenomenon that caught my attention is that the administrative sanctions cannot be appealed against. On most occasions, once the sanction is announced and the fine ticket is issued to the online news media, the decision is final. It can be neither appealed against nor amended. As the director stated:

*“There are many (websites which suffered sanction). I remember there were about 20 last year. Mostly, they received notices of criticism, only a few were fined, from 20 to 50 thousand yuan. [...] I don’t think we have been bothered about considering appeals on these causes” (P05).*

The administrative management is regarded as imperfect and arbitrary. The cyber police and the publicity department have authority and veto power over the online news content, though the process of censorship involves the participation of the online news media. Consequently, news workers have to censor the content they produce in order to comply with the regulations and avoid taboos. Therefore, an online news story has to go through at least two filters in the process: firstly, the news workers have to self-censor and censor the news content within the newsroom before publication; secondly, both the cyber police and the publicity administrators oversee and filter news content to ensure they are ‘politically correct’. If a news story causes “unnecessary troubles” or “negative social effects” (P07), the producers of the story have to take responsibility: the process of news production would be shifted, or the news media would be disciplined.

The way that cyber police influence the output of online news content is similar to their attitude toward the oversight of online news. Cyber police do not get involved in the

process of news conception and editorial control. Their role in the protocol of online censorship is delicate and in-direct. They are not even gatekeepers as Singer (1997) and Shoemaker and Vos (2009) have described. Their rank within the office limits their oversight. For decisions that have to be made in the online newsroom, such as inclusion and exclusion of news content, evidence shows that cyber police are not involved either. However, it does not mean that the setting-up of Internet censors is insignificant. Their engagement in the matrix indicates that they are important implementers who make sure that the *image of a harmonious society* (Hu, 2007) is portrayed, and that the priority to “maintain the fast-growing economy of China” (Petley, 2009: p.101) is supported in online media. Despite their disregard for some common news values, such as negativity, meaningfulness (Brighton & Foy, 2007: p.7), truthfulness, sense of humanity (Steel, 2009: pp.584-5), novelty, and story quality (Gans, 1980), their concern to maintain the image of hegemony for the Chinese authorities holds importance above all else. They added manual methods to the protocol of online censorship, which makes them a significant aid to the whole mechanism. Furthermore, in the sense of the internalisation of control within the newsrooms (Jansen, 1991), the existence of the cyber police and their activities out of the spotlight have demonstrated their quiet but consistent symbolic power in the background, by ensuring that Chinese online news workers conform to appropriate norms of behaviour.

## **5.5. Control of online news users**

### **5.5.1 User sanctions**

In contrast to the cautious attitude of censoring the online news media, cyber police have a straightforward, non-negotiable, and an indisputable attitude in censoring the users without the constraints of the hierarchical administrative ranking system. The cyber

police have a number of sanction methods for users who violate Internet regulations, such as bypassing the firewall, accessing banned online news content, posting *malicious* speech and spreading rumours. This research addresses the differences between the cyber police’s attitudes to censoring the online news media and the users because the distinctiveness of these attitudes determines the differences in censorship protocols. The protocol of censoring the users is therefore different from the protocol of overseeing the online news media; it is summarised and illustrated in the figure:

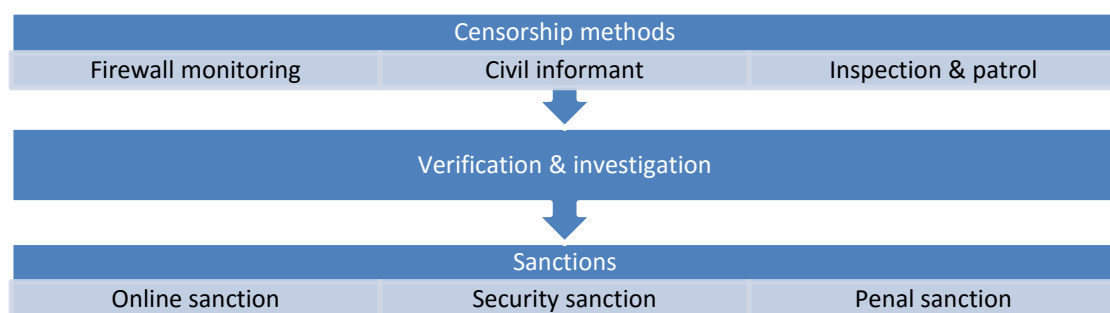


Figure 7 Process of users’ censorship

Censorship of the users employs three methods: firewall monitoring, civil informant from the public, and inspections and patrols. Firstly, the use of the firewall and filtering system is considered as the first filter stage for monitoring the users. Due to the enormous number of users in China and the volume of news content that is produced on the Internet, cyber police participants admitted that it was impractical to thoroughly censor the users via social inspections. The use of the firewall filtering is to establish the first stage of online content control, as P07 explains:

*“Normally, the firewall would label websites and user IPs in colours to indicate their degree of danger. The green lights means they are good, the red lights means they have problems. The red-labelled ones would be banned directly by the firewall. But on some occasions, the machine would label websites and IPS in yellow. That indicates the firewall is not secure. For these yellow-labelled ones, we are required to verify their safety manually” (P07).*

For cyber police officers, the use of the firewall frees them from manual online inspections, and promotes the effectiveness of Internet filtering and monitoring at work. Furthermore, the application of highlighted text inspection establishes a buffer area for online inspections. The firewall is employed to highlight uncertain information which the machine may not be intelligent enough to identify, and allows the cyber police officers to manually inspect this information at the later stage of filtering.

Secondly, employing civil informants is another method for the cyber police to control news content on the Internet. The wide-ranging civil informants may cover some blind-spots of the firewall and manual filtering. The officer (P07) explains the process of civilian tip-off from the web-pages of the cyber police websites and other websites which have the cyber police's links, as follows:

*“You roll the (website's) page to its bottom and you will see the cartoon police figures. Some pages have only one policeman, some have a pair, a policeman and a policewoman. [...] You click onto them, and enter our webpage. We have a click button for reporting on the page, a big blue one on the very right side on the top. You click on it, fill the form, it's done” (P07).*

The reason for discussing the development of mobilising citizens in Chinese culture is that the philosophy that backs the idea of employing civil informers on the Internet and having convenient links for the public to alert ‘malicious speeches and behaviours’ to the police, has historical origins. For example, the Cultural Revolution, which encouraged civil informants and cross-surveillance, created awareness of class struggles among civilians and destroyed trust between friends, family members and colleagues (Deng & Treiman, 1997; Burgh, 2003). This encouragement of tip-offs was instigated by the authorities in the name of ‘the greater purpose’, but civil informants were not given enough information in the process for them to make rational judgments, like questioning

the sanity of launching class struggles among families and friends through the Cultural Revolution (Zhang & Schwartz, 1997; Zou, 1991), and rationality of banning users' access to Party-unfavourable news content nowadays. For the authorities, mobilising citizens still works effectively, as both interviewees mentioned many times that they gained a great number of sources about Internet crimes and malicious speech from public informers or through 'tip offs'. Compared with the direct sources from civil informants, the records in the firewall system act as a well-established backup copy which provides direct data support for the cyber police.

The third method of censoring the users is inspections and patrols that mainly cover Internet cafés. Unlike the first two indoor methods, inspections require fieldwork for the cyber police officers. As the participants claimed, Internet café inspections are their most important outdoor duties:

*"We casually will launch operations to inspect and patrol. This is part of our job. An Internet café is often a place where the rumours started spreading. We find out that, on most occasions, the rumours were from Internet cafés" (P07).*

So far, from the evidence of the participants' descriptions, all Internet cafés are within the cyber police's jurisdiction areas. The routine inspection of the Internet cafés is considered as one of the significant parts of the protocol of user censorship. The local Internet cafés were portrayed as places full of different kinds of unemployed and low-income people. Some of them, according to the interview subjects, cannot afford to have a computer at home, therefore they pay the cheap Internet-surfing fee at Internet cafés and may be involved in activities such as accessing banned online news content and spreading rumours that are unfavourable to the authorities. For the cyber police officers, these



people are potential troublemakers who are most likely to violate the regulation of the Internet.

The participants also estimated that the age of users who commit crimes on the Internet, compared with the age of criminals in general, is younger than average. The officer (P07) described some of the online criminals as “almost kids”. However, both cyber police participants were not inclined to underestimate those young troublemakers, because as far as the police were concerned, the IT techniques that these so-called ‘kids’ possessed had enough potential to cause serious security troubles, as P07 pinpointed:

*“Now the hackers are getting smarter, some hackers will try to hide their real IP addresses. They may use multiple proxies to interfere our attempts to locate them, and they have excellent counter-surveillance skills” (P07).*

By having the counter-surveillance skills and hacker techniques, as the officer (P07) indicated, young online troublemakers would be able to commit various crimes, such as online scams, false information trading, rumour spreading, online assault, and even a series of acts endangering the national security. Noticeably, the term “corrupting thoughts from the west” was used by the director (P05) when he interpreted the meaning of a series of acts that could endanger the national security as ‘pornographic’, ‘anti-socialistic’, and ‘anti-government’. He further explains:

*“There are a lot (of acts that can endanger national security). For instance, advocating corrupt thoughts from the west, attempts at spreading cults, and some agitations for mass incidents” (P05).*

The sanctions for users who violated Internet regulations can be roughly categorised into three levels. As Figure 8 shows, the severity of sanctions are categorised at different levels.

The lightest sanctions lie on the first level. Internet users who attempt to access banned foreign websites may be sanctioned by cutting off their Internet connections and banning their access. At this level, cyber police officers usually do not confront the users. Instead, they use distant filtering and censoring to implement the sanctions. Acts such as bypassing the firewall and attempting to access banned foreign websites are called ‘circumvention’, which is a primary but forbidden technique for hackers who possess knowledge of using proxy servers. The second and third levels of sanctions escalate to punishments. They are the security punishments and penal sanctions. Both of them involve confrontations between the cyber police and users. The significant difference between them is that the penal sanctions must be judged and announced by the court, whereas the security punishments such as detentions and fines can be directly implemented clandestinely by the security services.

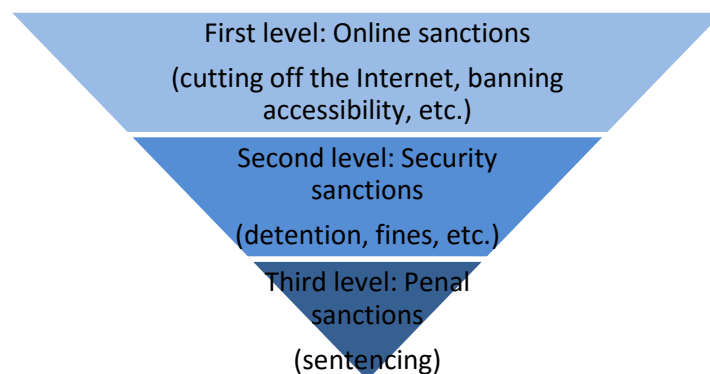


Figure 8 Reverse-pyramid of the types of sanctions and punishments for Internet regulation violators

At the first level of sanction, the cyber police officer admitted that the population of users who attempt circumvention was “beyond imagination” but they were rarely sanctioned because the consequence of personal circumvention was considered low impact. The officer (P07) explained that the firewall did most of the work so the cyber police did not need to confront the users. However, there was a significant loophole in the system:

*“The Great Firewall can detect you if you attempt to access some banned foreign websites, and it will block you immediately. But the system works automatically. [...] Your attempts will be recorded. But the record only survives for a short period of time. [...] Soon your record will be overwritten by new records, which is someone else’s record as they are also attempting to do the same thing as you do. It is likely that your record would be overwritten about a minute or so after it was recorded. [...] a user’s attempt at sneaking through the GFW is generally safe, we wouldn’t go to you” (P07).*

This description suggests that there are massive numbers of users circumventing, but overall they would not be troubled by the cyber police due to the loophole of the firewall. The records of these circumvention attempts would not be kept and therefore sanctions would not be implemented. However, it also indicates that attempts at circumvention will immediately cause web traffic to block within the security system. It commonly appears to the users as the network connection cutting-off:

*“[...] the system will cut off your Internet connection for a while, and before it turns back on again, you will temporarily lose your connection to the Internet. The cutting-off time can be manually set up by us, we usually set it for 60 seconds, in some places they may go for 100 to 200 seconds. You cannot use the Internet during that time, but your connection may indicate that it is functioning well. [...] After 60 seconds, you can gain accessibility again” (P07).*

Again, even though there is no direct evidence, telecommunication companies and network companies voluntarily provide access to users’ data for the cyber police; some indirect phenomena have suggested that cyber police and telecommunication companies may collaborate and exchange data. The Internet network which allows the cyber police to oversee online news media and their users is established by telecommunication companies, and users’ activities on the mobile phone cannot be monitored on a colossal basis without the support of a mobile network, as P07 explains:

*“Mobile devices and computers are the same. You attempt to access a banned website at home with your phone, the firewall will cut off your home Wi-Fi. [...] We can locate people via phones, unless you unplug the battery. But for some phones, their batteries are build-in, some laptops are the same. [...] They (mobile devices) are all alike to us” (P07).*

It is worth noting that though the focus of this research is censorship of online news, the reason for discussing users who are members of the public is that protocols of censoring these non-journalistic users are similar and users also use online news media, which makes their activities on the Internet inseparable from censorship of online news content.

In this sense, the use of informers is considered to be a real-time example of the ‘panopticon’ (Crandall, et, al., 2007; Jansen, 1991), where the pressure of censorship promotes self-censorship. The idea of establishing this protocol is therefore to create a virtual form of a surveillance network on the Internet which provides technical aid to manual censoring , and allows public informers to tip off authorities in order to expand the range of censorship of online content. This form of surveillance can be traced back to 1988 when Zuboff introduced the idea that computer technology can be used to create an information Panopticon for surveillance, and through its development the use of the network enables a panoptic form of observation for social control (Brigrall, 2002).

### **5.5.2 Privacy violations**

Privacy violation is a highly significant aspect for the cyber police in the process of controlling the users (Lyon, 2003; Raab, 2005). In the interviews, both cyber police officers refused to deny the fact that, during the process of surveillance and censorship on the Internet, violating users’ privacy was unavoidable. The follow-up problem for the cyber police officer is that they would also be vulnerable when they are using the Internet, because their personal information and social networks could also be disclosed. This goes

back to the discussion earlier in this chapter (3.3), that the cyber police officers, regardless of their administrative levels and authority ranks, are fearful of disclosure.

The awareness of disclosure and professional understanding of disclosure also increase the cyber police's fears about the Internet's social networks. The Director (P05) sniffed at social networks:

*"[...] for people who work in the NIS like me, Weibo isn't safe. Not just Weibo, We-chat, QQ, all the apps are dangerous. And the applicants as well. The modern devices are not safe. None of them. The more advanced a device is, the more dangerous it can be" (P05).*

This bureaucratic culture can explain the reason why cyber police officers tend to hide behind the digital screen and watch people over the Internet secretly. Their identity in the social network is hardly ever traced, because they keep an extremely low profile and attempt to remove their traces of online activities. This was what the director (P05) meant when he claimed that complex devices are more dangerous. By enforcing his point, he interpreted as follows:

*"My mobile is the oldest and simplest one, it only has basic functions such as dialling and texting, no other attachments. And I never send any texts. [...] Calling should be as short as possible. A three-word deal should not be extended to four words. If you want to talk, talk to me face-to-face" (P05).*

It is obvious that cyber police officers dislike their privacy being violated as they understand how Internet hacking and monitoring operates. Their use of the simplest devices which are unlikely to be traced or hacked can be seen as an awkward but effective method to shield themselves from disclosure. In their social life, they distance themselves from the Internet. Apparently, they are violating people's privacy when they know exactly the danger privacy disclosure can cause (*Chapter 5: 3.3*).

The descriptions of the cyber police participants also indicate that all users in China run the risk of being unaware of surveillance when they are using the Internet. Due to the existence of the powerful Great Firewall, users in China can be watched, and their locations, gender, social classes, political positions, and nationalities can be identified or accessed by the cyber police. The phones can be hacked, the e-mails can be read, chatting content can be recorded, and personal pictures and diaries can be scanned. In short, the surveillance reaches into every possible corner of private space.

Even though the users may be law-abiding citizens and have not shown any intention of breaking the law, their privacy can be violated on the Internet. This is for the purpose of, paraphrasing the participants' statements, ensuring Internet security and preventing potential harm to the harmonious Internet.

In this sense, the nature of cyber police officers' work shares ideas similar to the infamous PRISM program which is operated by the National Security Agency of the USA. Both of them operate as clandestine surveillance programs, and claimed that their original intention was to prevent and disrupt potential danger: against terrorism for the PRISM (Acohido, 2013; Braun, S.; Flaherty, A., Gillum, J., & Apuzzo, M., 2013) and to protect the harmony of the Internet in the Chinese case. A difference between PRISM and the cyber police is that Chinese policemen focus on the domestic users and people who use the Internet on China's territory only. There is no evidence to suggest that the cyber police can work on an international basis.

Undoubtedly, hacking into users' computers without a warrant is against the Chinese Constitution, (Liu, 2004) as the Constitution itself states in Article 40:

*"No organization or individual may, on any ground, infringe upon the freedom and privacy of citizens' correspondence except in cases where, to meet the needs of state security or of investigation into criminal offences, public security or procuratorial organs are permitted to censor correspondence in accordance with procedures prescribed by law" (NPC, 2004).*

However, in cyber police officers' daily work, violations of the privacy of citizens and of the law are routine. I recognise that this is another reason for cyber policemen to keep a low profile and avoid public attention, as the cyber police participants who actually participated in operations admitted that hacking into private computers without a warrant "might" be unlawful, which, in the officer's words (P07), is a "grey area":

*"To my understanding, it is the grey area in law. In our country, the legal system is imperfect, so are the articles of privacy protection. So if there isn't any written law indicating that what we do is illegal, then it isn't illegal. There is ambiguity here, so I'd say it is not illegal" (P07).*

A traditional operation routine for cyber police officers was to locate users' IPs, and operate a search and arrest strategy for those who violated the regulations on the Internet. The operational process requested manpower at the search scenes and permitted access to users' databases. The process, therefore, went through a procedure which required not just a warrant, but possibly the involvement of lawyers and legal disputes (Yang, 2015; NETEASE, 2008). But as the participants had explained, now the cyber police can oversee a particular user whom they suspect from a distance through their firewall system. The distant Internet observation technology enables the cyber police to locate users, and access users' data with ease (Yang, 2015), a process which P07 described as "the grey area" of privacy law in China.

### 5.5.3 User focussed strategies

Four strategies for censoring users can be identified. In the first, the colour alarm system is applied to free the cyber police from the heavy duty of online inspections. Secondly, cyber police officers launch Internet café inspections and patrols which, in the officer's (P07) view, are the origin of most rumours. The protocol and advantages of these two strategies are detailed in 5.4 in this chapter.

The third strategy is what I call 'the adjustment'. One of the daily duties of the cyber police is to record the occurrence of malicious comments that are posted by ordinary users in online news webpages. The number is used as an important criterion by which the government judges whether an online news medium poorly manages its online content control. When an online news medium allows malicious comments to exceed a certain quota, it risks receiving sanctions. The tricky fact here is that this quota may only be determined by the cyber police officers according to their inspection experience. That is, the quota can vary according to the size and influence of media organisations. The director (P05) explained that the tolerance of 'malicious speech' on the webpages is influenced by the number of clicks of the website:

*"We don't punish a website as soon as we find the evidence. For example, in some famous forums in Hangzhou, we can spot about 100 to 200 instances of malicious speech every day. They are mostly from ordinary users. But we have a quota for websites. That means... normally, say, a one-million-daily-click website is allowed to have less than 500 case of malicious speech" (P05).*

However, this quota of total-clicks/total-allowed-malicious-content is not always fixed. It appears adjustable by the cyber police for some special occasions and incidents, as the



participants indicated that at times “people need the chances to express and vent”, and so more malicious speech might be allowed:

*“If an online news medium wrote something critical, it would be acceptable. We did not interfere too much. People sometimes even cheered the criticism (of the government) from the media, but when the wave is gone, it is gone, it will be calm. [...] We used it ten years ago, on newspapers. When a crisis occurred, we would allow local newspapers to write critical editorials to cater to people’s anxiety, allow people to let negative feelings out. Now the method on the Internet is the same” (P05).*

This ability to make adjustments has its positive effect, as it allows users to vent their dissatisfaction towards the government on special occasions and during exceptional cases. This strategy can find its historical home with the channelisation theory (see *Chapter 2: 2.1*) and reflects the criticised and self-criticised culture of the Communist Party (see *Chapter 2: 3.2*). Secondly, like the Tong’s “guerrilla tactics” (2009), the adjustment also ensures the mediation of safe information along with censorship, as it can prevent removal of news content which is alleged to cross-the-line.

The fourth strategy of the cyber police is to hire hackers to improve and enhance their surveillance and censoring techniques. Some freelance hackers who are considered as elite in their field are recruited by the cyber police. However, this recruitment is a privilege that only a high-ranked public security ministry may exercise, as the officer (P07) admitted that a lower division of local public security is not entitled to hire these freelance hackers:

*“I know some hackers were recruited and work for the government. Some of them are top-class, and they are working for us now. But we can’t recruit them. We do not have the rank. Beijing’s bureau does” (P07).*

Chinese history books call this kind of recruitment “zhao an”, meaning that the government offers amnesty to rebels. It is seen as a strategy, through which the government authorises and legalises some illegal organisations or individuals for political purposes of stabilisation and harmony. The history of amnesty in China can be traced back to the prime time of feudal society. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Huang Chao (835-884), the leader of a peasant uprising, requested amnesty from the Emperor Xizong of Tang (Fairbank & Twitchett, 1979). In the late feudal society, along with the enforcement of centralisation, uprisings increased constantly. The imperial court offered more amnesties to rebels in order to maintain its dominance (Fairbank & Twitchett, 1979). Comparing the historical amnesty and current hacker recruitment, some resemblance is revealed. Firstly, these two strategies have a similar political purpose. They are both conducted to preserve the stability of the central government. Secondly, the government converted rebels/troublemakers into subordinates. For the cyber police, recruiting hackers can also soothe and assuage a number of technical elites who may disapprove of Internet surveillance and censorship. Some hackers who possess knowledge of posting threats to the censorship mechanism may be enlisted, meaning the number of hostile elements is reduced. Lastly, both feudal amnesty and current hacker recruitment can enhance the state apparatus, because new techniques and sources are brought in when rebels, troublemakers, or hackers are enlisted as flesh and blood.

Banning potentially contentious news material from being produced, and forbidding people from both publishing and accessing it are commonly seen as effective tactics for the authority to control and censor news media (Petley, 2009). This institutional set-up of cyber police reflects what Petley has argued is the use of the above mechanisms extended into cyberspace. Although many have indicated that the development of technology and information has potentially contributed to the liberalisation of the press (Castells, 1991;

Yang, 2003; Esarey, 2005), the development itself also aids the Chinese authorities to reinforce its control over the press. In this sense, cyber police adds manual assistance to media control, including what has been presented so far: filtering online information, banning political sensitive topics, and blocking access for people who discuss them on the Internet. The mechanism of this censorship is not limited only to online news, but also to those Internet users who may pose a threat to the image of harmonisation. I cannot but conclude that the prioritisation of presenting a harmonious society is a nationwide political campaign with historical roots in Confucianism and morality, developed through Maoism and the leadership of Deng and Hu, and has now become a significant stronghold of the ideological apparatus for Chinese authorities.

## **5.6. Conclusion**

By revealing and studying the institutional mechanisms of the cyber police and their systematic protocols in censoring the online news media and users, this chapter has discussed the administrative apparatus available to the Chinese authorities to censor and control content online. By doing so, it provides an account of how control is both enacted by individuals within administrative contexts, and presents the perspective of those who function within this context. It also describes how the users are monitored, censored, and at risk of being sanctioned if they bypass the firewall or access banned content online. Furthermore, it defines the notion of ‘harmony of the Internet’, which is believed by the cyber police officers to be the main driver of the application of Internet censorship. Furthermore, the existence of the cyber police demonstrates their symbolic power in the sense that censorship and control of the Internet are internalised within the newsrooms. The journalists are therefore required to conform to appropriate norms of behaviour in the process of online news production.

The next chapter will focus on the observation materials which explore the hierarchical structure in *Wenzhou News*, a local online news media. It will discuss Chinese online news workers' different roles and responsibilities in the process of online news production, how they act, react, and interact with the pressure of censorship in the newsroom, and how media supervision and Party infiltration influence the outcome of online news content.

# Chapter 6 Data & analysis II: Observation in the online newsroom of Wenzhou News

## 6.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses aspects of Chinese online news censorship by presenting and analysing observation data in the following ways. Firstly, it presents a visual representation of the hierarchical structure of the online news media in the *Wenzhou News* (WN), a regional online news media organisation in China. This hierarchical structure determines the ranking differences of online journalists, editors, and web administrators, and influences the autonomy of these news workers in the processes of online news production. Secondly, a layout of the newsroom presents the setup of the observation location. This assists in the presentation of the workflow dynamics, and highlights relational routines in news production. It particularly focuses on the protocol of how online news workers respond to censorship pressure from the Chinese authorities, and reclaim autonomy within the online newsroom using journalistic tactics. Thirdly, by discussing the different roles that these online news workers play in censoring online news content, such as user-generated content monitors, pseudo commentators, and supervisors, a key mechanism of Internet censorship established by the Chinese authorities in the online newsroom can be identified and understood. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the liberalising effect that marketisation has had on Chinese online news media in the ongoing media transformation, and the Chinese Communist Party's infiltration within the hierarchy of online news media.

Therefore, this chapter answers the following research questions:

- 1) How does the hierarchical structure of the online news media in China influence the process of online news production?
- 2) How do different online news workers in China respond to censorship pressure from the authorities?
- 3) What are the protocols through which the Chinese authorities maintain control over the online news media?
- 4) Are there journalistic responses for these online news workers in China to resist censorship? If yes, how do they resist?

## **6.2. Framework**

### **6.2.1 Observation setting**

To respond to the research questions listed above, this chapter lays out the details and findings of a four-week observation at *Wenzhou News* (WN). The observation period lasted from 6<sup>th</sup> May to 3<sup>rd</sup> June in 2011. The observation location was WN's 21<sup>st</sup>-floor office, the main online newsroom where different kinds of news workers, such as online journalists, editors, and supervisors, worked. As mentioned in Chapter 4: 4.4.4.1, I chose to keep record of the observed actions within the online newsroom in handwriting. During the four-week observation, the daily routine would begin at 8 a.m. when online journalists and editors started working. A lunch break lasted between 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. During this period the observation was paused. From 2 p.m. until 6 p.m. the observation was resumed as online journalists and editors started working again. It is worth noting that some journalists and editors might have left work earlier in the afternoon once they completed their daily tasks, whereas others might have worked overtime until late hours

of the day. For the purpose of data standardisation, the observation period was set to stop at 6 p.m. daily.

The observation of WN's online newsroom had two research aims. The first was to obtain a description of the dynamic interaction of online news production, where different news workers acted, reacted, and interacted in relation to the need to acquiesce to or negotiate with censorship within the newsroom. The second aim was to provide a basis upon which interviews could be conducted. A sketch of how censorship becomes operational within the newsroom was needed, along with an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of key players and the protocol of censorship in the process of online news production.

On account of ethical considerations, participants mentioned in this chapter are only labelled by their occupations. None of their names are mentioned, and their gender is not disclosed. This is to protect the identities of those who participated in the observation. In addition, for purposes of conducting non-participant observation the researcher exercised self-regulation and control in order to minimise their interactions with news workers. In doing so, the researcher reduced their interference and influence on the processes of online news production, ensuring that sound data was obtained for analysis.

### **6.2.2 Thematic outline**

A number of themes are discussed in this chapter. They can be classified into two main types: the first is discussion on key roles and responsibilities of different news workers in the online newsroom, and the second is detailed accounts of how censorship becomes operational within the online newsroom.

The analysis starts with introducing the background of the *Wenzhou News* and its host media organisation Wenzhou News Media Group. The discussion, then, continues to identify the responsibilities of different online news workers, particularly how they responded to censorship and what role they played in censoring online news content. This observation focuses on the activities of three kinds of actors in the online newsroom in China: online journalists, editors, and web administrators. This discussion focuses on the responsibilities of these different news workers in the context of the hierarchical structure in the news group, which systematically determines the level of autonomy that individual news workers have within the newsroom. To be precise, higher ranked web administrators have more autonomy in the newsroom than lower-level news workers in deciding on online news content; editors have more autonomy in changing, amending, or deleting online news content than online journalists, who are often ranked lower. The hierarchy also influences how the online newsroom is set up. The layout of WN's online newsroom on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor of its main building provided a visual demonstration of how the set up in the newsroom strengthens the distinctive roles of those who give and receive instructions, as the lower ranked news workers were physically separated from their superiors. The setting reflects the divisional characteristics of the hierarchy. It ensures the Chinese authorities can make political demands and give instructions to specific individuals in news organisation, and pass these instructions down to each journalist who works within the organisation. The study of this hierarchical structure therefore unveils the power flow between different activities in the online newsroom in China, and lays the foundation for later discussions of protocols and triangular models (*Chapter 7: 4*) of Internet censorship.

The second theme focuses on detailed accounts of how censorship becomes operational during the process of news production. The briefings that are regularly scheduled and held in the online newsroom are considered as a significant method for online news media



to deliver censorship instructions to news workers. News briefings are also a channel for the authorities to deliver their censorship pressure to the individual news workers, reminding and orientating them to censor, monitor, and filter online content. This online content includes not only the news content that online journalists and editors produce, but also user generated content. By making online news workers responsible for the online content that appears on their webpages, the authorities establish a significant protocol of censorship in the online news media and maintain control over it.

Apart from their roles in the journalistic field, online journalists and editors are also required to be user-generated content monitors and pseudo commentators, two roles that are considered irrelevant to online news production but heavily influenced by censorship pressure. The former role requires news workers to scan, filter, and delete user-generated content which is “crossing-the-line”, while the latter requires them to pretend to be ordinary users, and generate content that is favourable to the authorities in order to create a harmonious atmosphere on the website and orientate other users’ perspectives.

Another focus is on the role of the messenger that the web administrator plays in the process of online news production. The existence of supervision in the online newsroom in China was observed to be a key mechanism for the authorities to ensure that online news was politically correct, in order to produce online news content that synchronised with the official line. Lastly, this chapter concludes with discussion of what I call “journalistic tactics”, in relation to Tong’s “guerrilla tactics” (2009). Both terms refer to a number of tactics that online news workers in China use to ensure the safe mediating of information in the context of censorship.

## **6.3. Online news media: Key roles, responsibilities and hierarchy**

### **6.3.1 Hierarchical structure of the WN**

To understand the protocol of online news censorship, it is crucial to untangle the hierarchical structure within the online news media (Cottle, 2003). The structure of China's news media is arguably integrated within the structure of communist politics from before the 1980s (Lin, 1970). Broadly speaking, there tend to be two kinds of accounts of Chinese media structure and political power. The first sees the construction of Chinese news media as a form of integration within the authoritarian control. The main structure of news media was firmly established before the media transformation, for which reason the authorities now show little sign of lessening its control over news (Esarey, 2005, p56). The second attempts to interpret the impact of media transformation on the construction and shaping of the loyalty of Chinese news media and the normativity of Chinese journalists (Pan & Chan, 2003, Esarey, 2005; Tong, 2009). Thus, it is important to look at the hierarchical structure of the observation location at an early stage of analysis.

The pilot study discovered that the roles of editors and web administrators overlapped in some areas. Both these roles had responsibility for monitoring online news content on the website. The news workers' rankings and their autonomy within the newsroom are believed to be determined by the organisation's hierarchy. This led the research to focus on the hierarchical structure of the online newsroom in the formal observation period, and a hierarchical structure of WN was drawn (Figure 9 below).

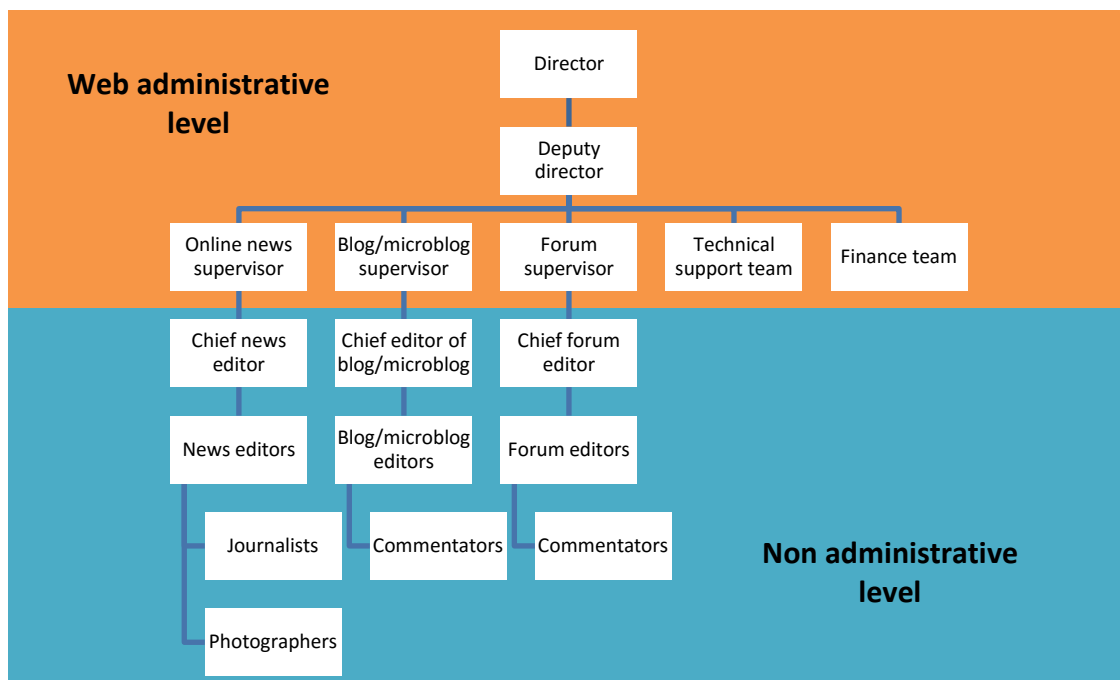


Figure 9 Hierarchical structure of WN

Although both editors and journalists have responsibilities for deleting or removing online content before the content is presented to the public, journalists were rarely found to be obliged to do so. The hierarchical structure indicates that journalists work at the bottom of the news production chain in the field. A higher rank in this structure gives more autonomy in the newsroom. The web administrator level is, as the hierarchy indicates, the most powerful in the chain; beneath this level, supervisors are in charge of implementing administrative instructions to editors and reporting back to the administrators. Editors are sandwiched between supervisors and journalists. Along with photographers and commentators, journalists are the lowest level in the online newsroom. Hence, journalists possess the least autonomy in altering, changing and editing online content.

The online media supervisors sit under the directors of the media group. They are also considered to be members of the web administrators group. The supervision team is

known to be senior employees of the media group who communicate, coordinate and oversee the common news workers on a daily basis, and pass on instructions from the directors. It is worth noting that most web administrators are Communist Party members.

Following the suggestion of Paulussen and Ugille (2008) to consider the hierarchy that exists between different departments in the news media group, I also paid close attention to the internal competition between different departments over financial income. This competition was observed within departments of online news, blog/microblog and forum. These departments operated independently, and produced online content to increase their attractiveness and competitiveness to the market, which would eventually result in more commercial contracts and income for their webpages. As an example, in celebrating Children's Day on 1<sup>st</sup> June, the blog/microblog department launched a special event for children. Bloggers were encouraged to write about their happy childhood memories using the hashtag #ChildrensDay in their posts, and in doing so would stand a chance to win prizes. The event attracted sponsorship from Dodola, a local children's fashion brand which eventually turned into profit for the organisation. Such competition, under the supervision of the media's directors and utilised by the participants, influenced the protocol of censorship within the newsroom as news workers sought to consider how they could produce market orientated content.

### **6.3.2 Layout of the online newsroom**

Inspired by Harrison's investigation of Britain's TV newsrooms (Harrison, 2000), I drew a diagram of WN's online newsroom layout (Figure 10). It shows the geographical setting of WN's 21<sup>st</sup>-floor office where the main online newsroom is located. Different colours represent different professional categories and their working zones. Navy blue represents where meetings and newsroom briefings are held; yellow shows where the supplementary

equipment is located; and black dots represent the areas of digital devices. The layout of this online newsroom displays characteristics of a hierarchical structure: instructive and divisional, which coincides with the lack of autonomy in the newsroom. It helps determine how the hierarchy of the online news media influences the workflow of news production. The approach of sketching the layout of the observation location is also referenced by Harrison (2006). In her discussion of terrestrial TV news in Britain she illustrates the layout of ITN channel's newsrooms to demonstrate the workflow of news production (Harrison, 2006: pp.93-98).

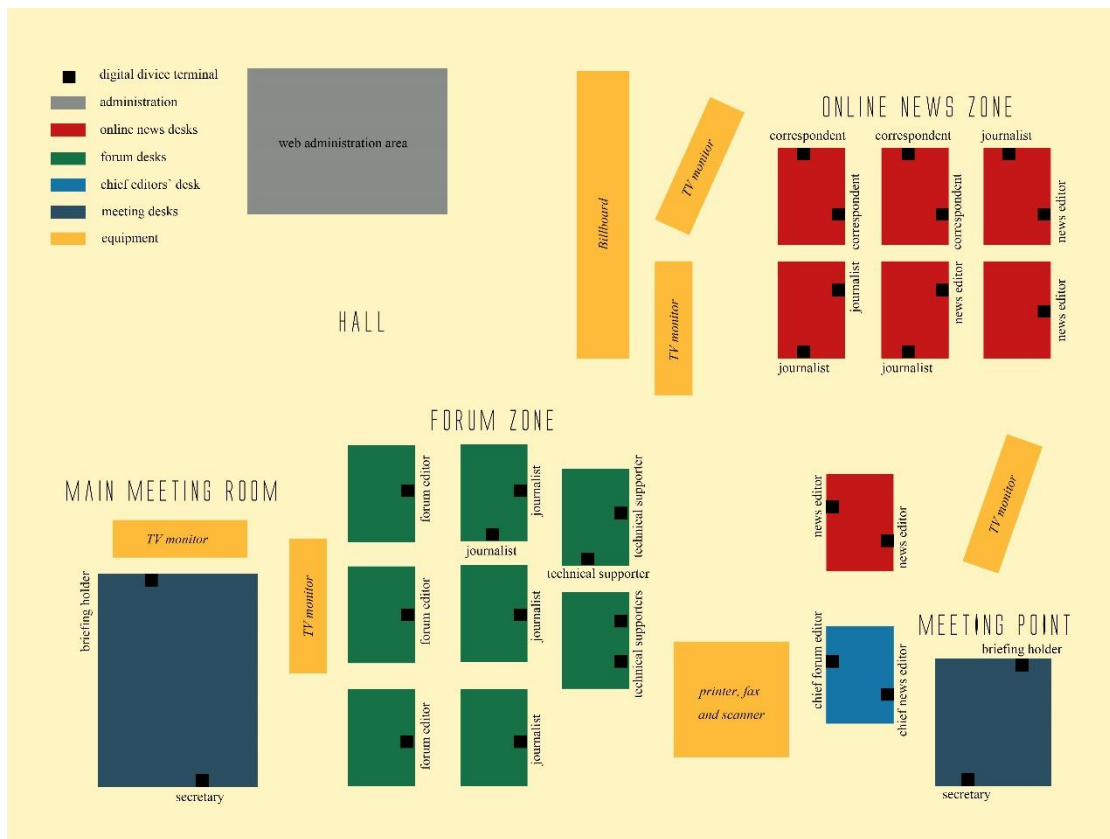


Figure 10 Layout of WN's online newsroom

WN's online newsroom had adopted a traditional layout in which different activities were divided and isolated in their own working zones. For lower-level online news workers, their supervisors' work space was close to them. This setting allowed supervisors to

monitor and assess the work rate of online journalists and editors at close range, whilst these lower-level employees could also give immediate reports to their supervisors during the process of news production.

Directors, on the other hand, had their own individual offices. A distinct line was drawn between these administrative workers and other news workers. They could not have clear sight of what was happening in the hall because their view was blocked by the solid walls of their offices and a large billboard. In the hall, online news staff and forum staff were separated into two different sections, and TV monitors, printers and scanners formed a fence-like barrier between them. To some extent, the setting of the newsroom discouraged interactions. Journalists, editors and web administrators were identified by their working zones: their journalistic practice was limited to their own working zones, and communication with other activities was impractical because of the walls and the barriers. Some editors and journalists suggested that they were not convinced by this style of setting because the visible barriers created inconvenience, but most of them appeared adaptable as the setting had been established when WN was founded in “ancient times” (P01). Zhao (2000) and Pan and Chan (2003) have argued that the transformation of the media organisation is incomplete in newspapers and TV. The barriers between higher and lower hierarchies suggest that this incompleteness also applies to online news media. In a conventional newsroom, demonstrating and distinguishing the hierarchical differences between the common online news workers and website decision makers through work zone positions, barriers and walls seemed to be a more important factor than newsroom dynamics. Moreover, interactions were not absolutely necessary in all stages of the news production process because supervisors and other web administrators often instructed journalists and editors, rather than interacting with them. By far, the setting of this layout only suggests a necessary classification of hierarchical differences.

## **6.4. Operationalisation of censorship in the online newsroom**

### **6.4.1 News briefing**

News briefing is a crucial routine that had been found in the process of online news production. It is considered as unique in the context of Chinese news media not because it is a required and mandatory step for journalistic normativity, but because it is constructed for the purpose of ensuring consistent pressure of censorship from the authorities. The routine is institutionally set up within the news production team, however the content in many briefings was found to be ideological rather than journalistic. This phenomenon reflects what Zhao (1998 & 2000) calls paradoxical in China's media; while the development of the Internet accelerates marketisation in the online news industry the authorities also intend to maintain control over it. By outlining notes from the fieldwork, this section explains the procedures behind news briefings in the online newsroom and how different procedures represent factors of operationalisation of censorship.

The length of the formal observation was set at four weeks. An important factor in determining the length was the discovery by the pilot study that WN's production cycle was roughly four weeks. It is worth noting that the production cycle here does not exclusively refer to a comprehensive period of being productive for certain news stories. The cycle was understood as a period of administrative choice, as the four-week period was scheduled by the WN as a comprehensive cycle for its news production. Certain tasks that online news workers worked on in this production cycle might be continued to the next; and a news worker was likely to work on multiple tasks in any production cycle.

For instance, some junior editors of the WN had responsibilities for news editing and being pseudo users (*Chapter 6: 4.2*) who pretend to be ordinary users, make comments on news stories and attempt to swing public opinion.

The WN was divided into a number of divisions. These were online news, forum, and blog/microblog. All held individual briefings at the beginning of every week, and at the beginning of every month an internal briefing, comprised of all divisions, was held. Staff from every division were required to attend this internal briefing. This monthly internal briefing provided guidelines for the divisional briefings in the following weeks, and distributed tasks for news workers. One monthly internal briefing was recorded during the observation; the details and agendas of this briefing were as follows:

*[...]*

*[9:35 a.m.] The briefing is called.*

*[9:35 a.m.] Journalists and editors pack up their notes and pens, head to the main meeting room.*

*[9:40 a.m.] Deputy Director enters, and starts his speech.*

*[9:40 a.m.] Deputy Director highlighted three news workers, 3 journalists and 1 editor, for their contribution during last month. Together they produced 16 news stories and 2 news features. A story about civil plant engineering was highlighted as last month's the most popular story.*

*[9:52 a.m.] Deputy Director described a meeting with the publicity department that he attended last weekend, delivered what he called 'the spirit of the meeting', and emphasised the importance of 'grasping the orientation of harmony'.*

*[9:52 a.m.] Some attendees seem bored. A few start chatting in whispered voices.*

*[10:05 a.m.] Deputy director summarised two deficiencies from the last month: a commercial on the main page of the website was misplaced, and the microblog platform was dysfunctional for 10 hours or so.*

*[10:09 a.m.] More attendees show their tiredness.*

*[10:09 a.m.] Deputy Director stops his speech and asks whisperers to be quiet.*

*[10:11 a.m.] Deputy Director resumes.*



*[10:14 a.m.] Deputy Director finishes his speech.*  
*[10:14 a.m.] Chief editor of online news gives briefing about forthcoming events of his section.*  
*[10:27 a.m.] On behalf of the chief editor of forum, an editor from the forum gives briefing about forthcoming events of his section.*  
*[10:40 a.m.] Chief editor of blog and microblog gives briefing about forthcoming events of his section.*  
*[10:58 a.m.] Briefing over.*  
*[10:58 a.m.] Attendees leave the main meeting room one after another.*  
*[...]*

As the record above shows, in the monthly internal briefing, communication between the presenter and audience was unidirectional: the presenter delivered the messages whilst the audience received them. The audience was not required to give feedback, nor did they become involved in any discussions. Although all the briefings in the newsroom were strictly and regularly scheduled, the duration of the divisional briefings seemed spontaneous. For instance, the longest divisional briefing lasted an hour and three quarters. Compared with other divisional briefings in the following weeks, the monthly internal briefing lasted a shorter time, and was more compact and less communicative, whereas the briefings that were held by separate divisions were more relaxed and interactive. For instance, one of the division briefings of the online news was recorded as follows:

*[...]*  
*[9:10 a.m.] The briefing is called.*  
*[9:10 a.m.] Journalists and editors head to the main meeting room.*  
*[9:10 a.m.] Chief editor (of online news) heads to the main meeting room.*  
*[9:10 a.m.] Audience chit-chat casually.*  
*[9:14 a.m.] Chief editor starts his introduction.*  
*[9:14 a.m.] Chief editor summarises the work and achievements from last week.*  
*[9:17 a.m.] Other journalists and editors are involved, through discussion of their achievements.*  
*[9:20 a.m.] Audience makes jokes, and they laugh. The atmosphere is relaxed.*  
*[9:23 a.m.] Chief editor asks for focus.*  
*[9:23 a.m.] No attendees show obvious tiredness.*

*[9:23 a.m.] Chief editor starts distributing tasks for this week: 1) Collaborating with the blog/microblog section, feeding the microblog with news stories as the Deputy Director requires. 2) A reminder to focus on censoring user-generated comments on the website. 3) A new rota for night shifts. 4) Appointing journalists for attending the provincial sport events in Hangzhou next month.*

*[9:35 a.m.] Chief editor finishes his distribution.*

*[9:35 a.m.] Journalists and editors start discussions relating to the tasks.*

*[9:35 a.m.] A journalist complains about the mandatory collaboration with the microblog.*

*[9:40 a.m.] An editor gives his suggestion and reminds others to pay close attention to those who speak highly of government officials when they are censoring the user comments, as some users may be sarcastic.*

*[9:40 a.m.] Some of the attendees seem to be drifting away from the discussion. Some of them show tiredness.*

*[9:50 a.m.] Briefing over.*

*[9:50 a.m.] Audience leaves the main meeting room one after another.*

*[...]*

Agendas were delivered in these monthly internal divisional briefings. From these field notes, I can therefore generalise that four main agenda items were either delivered or discussed in briefings in the WN newsroom, which were: 1) summarising the work and achievements from the last period; 2) briefing about forthcoming events and distributing tasks to different groups and individuals; 3) calculating and analysing the mistakes and errors that occurred in the last period, and 4) delivering instructions from the publicity department and the government on issues such as news production and the direction of public opinion.

The first two agenda items were considered compulsory. In all four briefings that I attended, the meeting chair, either the Deputy Director or chief editor of online news sections, presented the summaries and distribution of tasks. However, the third and fourth agenda items were only discussed when the Deputy Director was presiding.

Therefore, the four-week observation was determined by the length of WN's production cycle. The newsroom's basic objectives of newsgathering and reporting were not changed within this time, so the four-week period can be seen as a self-contained and complete cycle for its news production. It was estimated that the content within this period – such as the different roles in the newsroom, general workflow, protocols of news reporting and the influence of Party intervention – could be observed, recorded and explored thoroughly from beginning to end. The results of the observation confirm that this estimate was accurate.

There are at least two factors that need to be flagged in news briefings. Firstly, there is a significant legacy evident in the news hierarchy that can be considered a left-over from the pre-transformation era. The leadership of the authorities and the political demand to support the ideology is ensured by the hierarchy within the news organisation (Zhao, 1998; McNair, 2009; Lee, 2005). To serve this purpose, Chinese journalists are instructed on the inclusion and exclusion of their news stories. This leads to the second factor; this hierarchy and news briefing system impact the process of judging newsworthiness and can therefore influence the output of news content. In this sense, the news values are influenced by what Gans (1980) calls 'organisational requirements' and 'external determinism', where the hierarchy of the organisation and ideology affect story choices. In this stage, news briefing is considered institutional as few signs of marketisation and resistance to political interference were witnessed.

#### ***6.4.1.1 Manifest pressure of censorship***

The process of revealing and observing online news production and relationship between online news and the authorities was a developing one. As the observation progressed, I

established and expanded a number of models regarding this relationship and the mechanism of online censorship. For instance, the observation on single briefing recorded how the instruction was given and received within the newsroom, but the records of monthly internal briefings and divisional briefings transmitting the demands of the Chinese authorities indicated where the censorship pressure came from. The pressure of censorship, which mainly focuses on synchronising the tone of news media (Hong, 2006), serves the purpose of maintaining the stability of Chinese society (Hu, 2007, Zhang, 2011). Thus the briefing is key to passing the political demands of Chinese authorities down the chain of the organisational structure, in which Chinese online news workers have to “deliberately” (Horton, 2011: p.93) avoid discussing contentious topics because they are likely to cause offence to the authorities. In this sense, these particular sensitive topics, which are understood as ‘minefield’ areas, or a ‘propaganda minefield’ in general (Tong, 2009: p.595), can also be witnessed in online news production.

The pilot study (*Chapter 3: 4.5*) delivered two preliminary findings. First, it established a rough model that demonstrates the unidirectional relationship between the authorities and the online news workers (figure 11). Web administrators are the only group of people in the online newsroom who regularly communicate and exchange information with the authorities. On the other hand, the authorities give instructions relating to news reporting, public opinion orientation and taboo subjects in online news via the web administrators. It is worth noting that in this model, the hierarchy in the online newsroom is yet to be precisely distinguished, and the rank difference between editors and journalists is not realised. However, the reasons for keeping and analysing this model are: Firstly, the original first model that was generated in the observation presents an initial relationship between the authorities and online news media, which was unidirectional and dictatorial. Secondly, through the process of data analysis, this model is developed and expanded on

to become interactive and multidirectional (*Chapter 7: 4*) and demonstrates the power flow between the online news media, cyber police and the publicity departments. Figure 11 presents how the protocol of Internet censorship appears to those who are outside the Chinese online news industry, whereas the later triangular models (*Chapter 7:4*) present the power flow and network within the online newsroom in China. A demonstration of how these models are developed and expanded can provide a thorough landscape of the matrix in online news censorship.

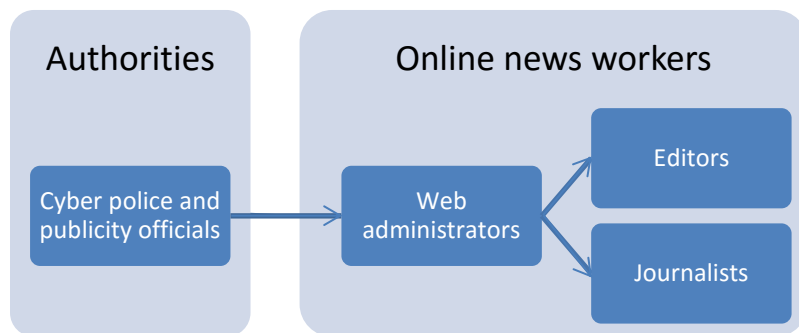


Figure 11 The unidirectional instruction-giving model of the authorities and the online news workers

Figure 11 shows the links between the authorities and the different types of roles in the online news media, as well as the indirect connections between the authorities and lower-level news workers. It was found that neither the cyber police officers nor publicity officials had frequent direct interactions with editors and journalists. Instead, the web administrators acted as intermediaries. However, as mentioned above, the hierarchical difference between editors and journalists is not demonstrated in this model; nor does it indicate significant interaction between these two areas of work. The representativeness of this relative lack of interaction will be discussed in the next chapter. Journalists and editors from other online newsrooms also admitted that they did not know many publicity officials or cyber police were charged with online censorship, due to the lack of

communication between them and members of the authorities. The censorship pressures, however, were strongly felt, as they were frequently reminded and briefed to self-censor the news content that they produced and self-estimate if this content might cause intervention from the authorities. Censorship therefore becomes internalised. This reflects one of the tactics that Petley (2009: pp.3-4) outlines: the authority using this mechanism to prevent contentious material from being produced in the process of news production. It is worth noting that Petley's argument is not only limited to newspapers and TVs, but is also evident in cyberspace, in authoritarian and democratic countries. From here, the argument formulated in this model can be legitimately extended to the process of online news production.

One of the main differences between editors and web administrators is that web administrators are heavily engaged in corresponding with the publicity department of the government on a daily basis, while the focus of editors is on content monitoring. Web administrators often gave top-down instructions, whereas editors censor what online journalists produce, and sometimes play a crucial role in lubricating the relationship between online journalists and the web administrators.

Besides their responsibilities in censoring the news content that they produce, online journalists and editors are also obligated to monitor the online content that users produce on their webpages. The divisional briefings were also recorded to warn and remind the news workers to censor this user-generated content, for instance:

[...]  
[9:35 a.m.] A journalist complains about the mandatory collaboration with  
the microblog.

[9:40 a.m.] An editor gives his suggestion and reminds others to pay close attention to those who speak highly of government officials when they are censoring the user comments, as some users may be sarcastic.  
[...]

This example reflects a typical protocol of news control on the Internet. Petley (2009) has argued that preventing contentious material from being produced is one of the tactics that the authorities use to maintain its control over news content. Here, in practice, this form of news-briefing is a less drastic approach to controlling compared to the sanctions and fines which come directly from the authorities. I had earlier established that the shared professional normative amongst journalists do not guarantee a trouble-free situation for news organisations (Soloski, 1998: p.213). Thus, the news organisation has to adopt this *briefing* procedure into its day-to-day journalism routine, in order to restrict online news workers from producing contentious material.

The local publicity department was perceived as having a huge influence over the online news. In the monthly internal meeting, the Deputy Director gave briefings about instructions from the Wenzhou publicity department. The theme of these instructions was interpreted as *public opinion orientation* (Chapter 1: 5.3). The chief editor delivered, as he phrased it, ‘the spirit of an important meeting’ that he had attended the previous weekend at the Wenzhou publicity department. The conversations and discussions that followed were focused on the topic of this ‘spirit of an important meeting’: the publicity department briefed the major news websites in Wenzhou about ‘further standardisation and orientation of Internet news media’. This standardisation was translated as ‘enhancing the roles of the commentary team in orientating and monitoring online user-generated content’. The censorship pressure from the local publicity departments was enormously influential, so much so that one of the purposes of the briefing in WN was to orientate journalists and editors to the role of pseudo commentators.

In summary, there are a number of discussions on how Chinese authorities have managed to maintain control over news media (Chen & Lee, 1998; Zhao, 1998; de Burgh, 2003; and Petley, 2009). It is evident that this mechanism is also applicable in online news. By analysing the field notes and interpreting key factors, it is legitimate to conclude that the hierarchy and the embedded party organisation within online news media allow the authorities to prevent or ban the production of contentious content that is contrary to their interests (Petley, 2009: p.101). Furthermore, the mechanism of news briefing allows authorities to give instruction to higher levels of hierarchy in the online newsroom, which ensures that political demands can be effectively passed down to lower levels of hierarchy, that is, the individual online news workers.

#### **6.4.2 User-generated content monitors and pseudo commentators**

Along with their responsibilities in the process of news production, it was observed that both editors and journalists had roles as pseudo commentators and user-generated content monitors. The responsibility of being user-generated content monitors, as the name indicates, is to monitor the user-generated comments on the website's news pages. As part of their daily routine, online news workers in the WN were required to both scan and filter user-generated content and delete those items which were alleged to have '*crossed the line*' (P00 & P06). It is seen as an authoritarian tactic of "preventing contentious material" (Petley, 2009: pp.3-4), or the synchronisation of tone in news media (Hu, 2007) in order to maintain an image of a harmonious society. Prohibited speech which criticised particular officials, personal attacks, speculation and rumours, and advertising links could all be considered as contentious or unfavourable. Some parts of the field notes recorded the process of scanning and filtering as follows:



[...]

[12:14 p.m.] Editor A starts to scan the user comments.

[12:14 p.m.] Editor A logs into the backstage platform, types key word 'discount' in search, and quickly browses the search results.

[12:18 p.m.] Editor A clicks some results that match the key word 'discount', deletes those he finds to be advertising links posted by users.

[12:20 p.m.] Editor A searches key word 'government', and quickly browses the search results.

[12:25 p.m.] Editor A clicks on some results that match the key word 'government', deletes those he finds to be spreading rumours about the government or personal attacks on officials.

[...]

[...]

[03:20 p.m.] Editor B starts to scan the user comments.

[03:20 p.m.] Editor B logs in to the backstage platform, types key word 'corrupt' in search, and quickly browses the search results.

[03:27 p.m.] Editor B clicks on some results that match the key word 'corrupt', but does not delete any user comments.

[03:30 p.m.] Editor B searches key word 'official', and quickly browses the search results.

[03:40 p.m.] Editor B clicks on some results that match the key word 'official', deletes those comments related to personal attacks on officials.

[03:40 p.m.] Editor B revisits the searched page of 'corrupt', and quickly browses a number of comments. But he does not delete any of them.

[03:50 p.m.] Editor B searches key word 'mistresses', and browses the search results.

[04:00 p.m.] Editor B clicks on some results that match the key word 'mistresses', deletes one comment he finds likely to be a personal attack on officials.

[...]

The notes present a standard procedure of how the user-generated content was filtered and censored in the WN. Journalists and editors used keyword searching to scan and filter user-generated content on the webpages, in order to pick up and delete content that was prohibited. Editor A's filtering on the keyword "discount", as he explained, was for commercial reasons, because users were not allowed to post free advertisements on the website. Apart from this financial consideration, other keywords that editors focused on, such as "government", "corrupt", and "official", were all political. These words could often appear in the text which users commented on, and relate to prohibited speech which

criticised particular officials, personal attacks, speculation and rumours. This content was considered to have crossed the line and therefore had to be deleted by user-generated content monitors.

However, the process of this keyword scanning and filtering was highly unsystematic and heavily relied on the personal judgment of user-generated content monitors. Although both journalists and editors were required to monitor as part of their daily work, the frequency and time length of scanning were not fixed, nor was the amount of content specified. This means journalists and editors had autonomy in choosing how often to monitor the user-generated content, how long the process lasted and how much content to go through. Moreover, journalists and editors decided whether to delete certain user-generated content merely on their personal judgment, because they admitted the content that needed to be scanned was “too much and impossible to go through thoroughly”. The scanning and deleting was therefore a random and flexible process that was based on the first instinct of these user-generated content monitors. The range of key words covers a broad scope of politically sensitive topics. It indicates that one of the significant purposes of conducting this filtering is to maintaining a harmonious image on the Internet. Online news workers did not voluntarily filter and delete user-generated content, but as an important phase of censorship of online content these acts can be considered as an application of the political demands of authorities. The requirements or instructions from news briefing are applied as the online news media needs to maintain a hassle-free and trouble-free environment on its webpages. In this sense, these acts are not considered to be gatekeeping because their purpose is not to promote “storytelling” (Singer, 1997:p.97) or “quality controlling” (Canter, 2014:p.112) of news content.

Unlike the responsibility of user-generated content monitors, which was foreseen before the observation, the existence of pseudo commentators was rather unexpected. The work of being a pseudo commentator involved editors and journalists pretending to be normal users, and generating content on the news pages, online journalists and editors were required to register and log into their multiple user accounts from their own websites, pretending to be normal users and post comments. Having pseudo commentators allowed the online news to have control of creating the harmonious atmosphere on the website, and orientate other users' perspectives by filling the user comment pages with massive synchronous content. In the field diary, I recorded a story of a robbery that broke out in a local market:

*“This breaking news enabled me to witness another function of the online news team, which I named, ‘pseudo commentators’. Editors switched between lots of different user accounts that they owned to create different comments for a news story. The hits on the robbery story suddenly boosted up and it became the most popular news. Soon it was headlined on the homepage” (Diary of ‘13 May 2011, Friday’).*

Due to the contribution of these pseudo comments, the robbery story became popular on the website, and a significant influence was witnessed, as other users' comments were heavily guided:

*“The comments on the news of the robbery and arrest were unexpectedly harmonised. Users were orientated to praise the shoppers and securities' courage (of stopping the crime) and condemned the lawlessness of the rogues. Editor C roughly went through the comments, but didn't find any comments he needed to delete” (Diary of ‘13 May 2011, Friday’).*

The pseudo commentators switched between many different user accounts that they owned to post different comments for news stories. By doing this, hits for news stories would sharply increase and the stories then became popular. A news story, therefore, may

appear to have a higher profile than it actually has. Moreover, the pseudo commentators contributed to the news hype and effectively manipulated public attention. In this way the online news provider could influence the news hits on the website and choose which news stories it wanted to popularise. The pseudo commentators, as their name suggests, orientated the overall tone of user-generated comments on the news website, where the news pages and user comment pages were filled with massive synchronous content that eventually appeared harmonious.

The existence of pseudo commentators in the online newsroom is a peculiar phenomenon which triggered my attention during observation. Having a group of pseudo users pretend to be someone else and attempt to influence public opinion in the process of censorship may seem absurd, but it displays certain rationality. What McNair (2009: p.240) refers to as Chinese journalism is part of an institutional ideological apparatus of the authoritarian state, and Lee's (2005) characterisation of Chinese journalists having dual roles and having to paradoxically serve the communist authorities, can be found in the Chinese online news industry.

Similar to their role as monitors, the role of pseudo commentators is also an application of the mechanisms behind news briefing. The hierarchical structure ensures that online news workers orbit the central purpose of maintaining stability, and the press itself orbits the party state (Zhao, 2000: p.3). To make this mechanism functional there is also a strong element of Confucianism at play. Confucianism proclaims *morality* that undermines individual freedom for the benefit of the collective (Gardner, 2003). This notion may have been modernised (Passin, 1963) and radically criticised (Schwartz, 1986; Lee, 2005), but it remains influential in online news production even today, as this study has found.. The content of news briefing, and instructing to monitor, censor and pretend to be pseudo

commentators to influence public opinion suggests that Confucianism had not only had a huge impact on the press in China before the era of the Internet (Levenson, 1962; Passin, 1963; Lee, 2005), but also after it.

### 6.4.3 Supervision and Party infiltration

Supervisors of the online newsroom repeatedly used the term ‘we journalists’ or ‘us journalists’ during the observation period, which implied that they were self-manifesting their heavy involvement in the news production process. Evidence also indicated that they were convinced that their work was part of the news production, and their role in the newsroom was essential. However, newsroom observations indicated that their involvement in the processes of news production was not as vital as they self-perceived and claimed. There is a distinct difference between what supervisors think they do and what they actually achieve in journalistic practice. The field notes recorded as follows:

[...]  
[14:05 p.m.] Supervisor of online news walks into the newsroom, and engages in random discussions with other editors.  
[14:07 p.m.] Supervisor of online news discussed with editor D and editor E over the subject of ideology control.  
[14:07 p.m.] Supervisor of online news asked “can you imagine what these young journalists would write if we didn’t remind and repeat to them ‘do not cross the line’? A website without supervision would be a disaster. ”  
[...]

Despite their self-identification as journalists, supervisors were found to have little participation in journalistic practices, information gathering, interviewing, and news production. These journalistic practices, however, were carried out by journalists and editors. A standard protocol of writing-up news stories is the job of online journalists, and editors are responsible for censoring the content and discourse. At this stage, editors have to take account of both the public readership and the authorities, as they may suggest a

re-work if they feel the angle or expression of news stories might be unfavourable to the authorities. For example, the observation notes recorded a request by an editor to re-work a news story protesting against local government and its policies, because the journalist who wrote the story was assessed as biased and showing “too much sympathy” to the protesters:

[...]  
[11:18 a.m.] *Journalist A finishes an electronic version of a story of a rural market fair.*  
[11:18 a.m.] *He saves the file in the internal storage, and sends message to editor F, informs the editor of his submission*  
[...]

[...]  
[4:50 p.m.] *Editor G accesses the internal storage. He clicks on the most recent news draft, and starts editing.*  
[4:55 p.m.] *Editor G mumbles while he’s reading the news draft on the expansion of city green belt.*  
[...]  
[5:15 p.m.] *Editor G starts editing the next news draft on housing demolition conflict, written by journalist B.*  
[5:20 p.m.] *Editor G sends message to journalist B.*  
[5:25 p.m.] *Journalist B comes along.*  
[5:25 p.m.] *Editor G says to journalist B: “This work is no good to me. What were you thinking?”*  
[5:25 p.m.] *Journalist B explains his conception process to Editor G.*  
[5:30 p.m.] *Editor G says to journalist B: “Your thinking was understandable, but you should always spend less words on protesters for news like this. Here is what I think...” [The context of protesters and the news unknown]*  
[...]  
[5:35 p.m.] *Editor G says to journalist B: “Rewrite this story, and delete the part about protesters. Try not to be inclined to the protesters.”*  
[5:35 p.m.] *Journalist walks away.*  
[...]

Supervisors were not found to be involved in the process of censorship described above. However, this does not mean that supervisors have little influence on the production of online news, as the request to re-work the choice of news angle and the unfavourable

attitude of sympathy towards the protesters were all considered as consequences of news supervision. Supervisors were found to be heavily involved in pre-production, where online journalists and editors were briefed by the supervisors to keep news content “politically correct”. Thus, the news media supervisors are likely to be ideological guiders or political gatekeepers rather than actual online news workers who are doing journalistic work in the newsroom.

Here, observation also examined the influence that supervision had on the editors and journalists. The information in the news reports is included or excluded throughout the process. The inclusion and exclusion of content is heavily influenced by the underlying ideology and understanding of the socio-political situation (Tong, 2009: p.594). What Tong (2009) categorised as key factors in the practice of self-censorship among newspapers in China is also evident in the online news media.

Other web administrators also acted as the messenger for the authorities, as they delivered pressure from the authorities to online journalists and editors. For instance, the director of the WN constantly emphasised the importance of keeping a ‘harmonious atmosphere’ for the website:

[...]  
[9:52 a.m.] Deputy Director described a meeting with publicity department that he attended last weekend, and emphasised the importance of ‘grasping the orientation of harmony’.  
[...]

Therefore, the reason for having supervision in the process of online news production is to have a reminder and ideological guide for the journalists and editors. Throughout the process of news production, web administrators do not participate in journalistic work,

but their existence constantly reminds journalists and editors to remain politically correct in producing online news content. They deliver the censorship pressure from the authorities to individual news workers in the online newsroom, and their political tie to the Communist Party also indicates which camp they are in and whose interests they represent.

This phenomenon reflects what Lee (2005) characterises as the “communist/capitalist journalists” in modern China (Lee, 2005: p.117-21). These communist/capitalist journalists paradoxically negotiate between the underlying communist ideology and capitalist market operation. As is required of their dual roles, they have to sustain political sensibility and bypass the minefield of political taboos, while at the same time efficiently producing news content of interest to other journalists and the public. Tong (2009) referred to this form of censorship in the newspaper as a balance of powers (Tong, 2009:p.607-8). In this regard, the online news workers are no different from newspaper journalists and editors.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter (3.1), most web administrators were found to be members of the Communist Party. Senior web administrator posts were mostly occupied by Party members, and a high percentage of employees were members of the Party or its Youth League (Gong Qing Tuan). The high percentage of Party and Youth League members in the hierarchy can be interpreted as infiltration of the online news media by organised and functional Party forces. The supervisors sat between the directors of online news and the lower-level news workers, and they coordinated and passed on messages for the directors. Party branches were established within the online news operation, which seemed to have little relevance to the work of the newsroom but were a significant symbol of the Party’s control over the website. A Party branch and a Youth League branch were



established', and supervisors of the online news and blog/microblog sections served as the heads of these branches respectively. Its effect on journalistic practice could be to make the media consider the Party's interests as the top priority rather than news values:

[...]  
[10:40 a.m.] Supervisor of online news walks into the newsroom, tells chief forum editor and chief news editor to have a look at a number of comments and posts on the website.  
[10:40 a.m.] Supervisor of online news said: "Seems there is a leak, I don't know if it's true. Rumours say the deputy director of Land Management has a mistress. She exposed the scandal to some local bloggers, and users are now all talking about it."  
[10:40 a.m.] Editors search the comments and blogs.  
[10:45 a.m.] Chief forum editors said: "No matter if it's true, we have to delete them (comments)."  
[10:45 a.m.] Some editors agree. Other silent ones do not object.  
[10:45 a.m.] Supervisor of online news stresses: "Get everyone to work, delete anything you found suspicious. Delete things you found may be suspicious. And shut down the search engine for key words 'land management' and 'mistresses', and any other words that you think can be related to this. I forbid you to report it until we get firm feedback from the publicity department."  
[10:45 a.m.] Supervisor of online news adds: "I'd erase 100 true feeds, rather than letting a single rumour leak, at least not from our website."  
[10:50 a.m.] Chief news editor distributes the task of comments-deleting to his editors and journalists.  
[10:50 a.m.] Some news workers complain.  
[10:55 a.m.] Chief news editor said to his editors and journalists: "I'm sorry, but it's your time to show some political consciousness."  
[...]

These phenomena indicate that the Party is solidly in control of online news, as an editor reluctantly admitted that "we know who the real boss is". The reason for stressing the role of Party infiltration is that the later stages of this analysis explain certain principles of the coordination and restriction triangular models. In the triangular models, which will be elaborated in the next chapter, Party influence goes beyond one governmental organisation controlling another news organisation. Rather, the infiltration is believed to make the news organisation partially a governmental one. That is the reason I prefer to use the word 'infiltration' rather than 'influence' here to describe Party control and power. The nuance is that 'infiltration' had made the online news process into a coordinator or

facilitator of online media censorship, whereas the term ‘influence’ suggests the news was forced to conduct self-censorship in a totally unwilling way. For other non-Party news workers, the identities and roles of these Party workers were transparent. The existence of the Party branch and youth league branch was embedded in the structure of media organisation since the day of its establishment. Thus, none of the non-Party news workers found it was unacceptable or inconvenient in the process of news production.

The reason that the Party’s interests of maintaining stability and harmony in the economic and social environment overrule other aspects of news value, can be explained by what Zhao (1998) calls ‘the party principle’. He argued that “the news media must accept the Party’s guiding ideology as its own [...] and they must accept the Party’s leadership and stick to the Party’s organizational principle and press policies” (Zhao, 1998, p. 19). Newsroom observation reveals that this requirement for obedience and adherence to the Party’s interests is present. It indicates that other universal news values, such as truthfulness, entertainment, and sense of humanity (Steel, 2009: pp.584-5) can be undermined or compromised in the production of online news for purposes of sustaining the Party’s interests. This includes that online news are sometimes instructed to deliver an image of a harmonious society by concealing social conflict (Tong, 2009: p.607). From the perspective of supervisors, the existence of supervision is considered as an irreplaceable organ of the hierarchical construction, without which the mechanism of censorship in online news media may collapse. However, some crucial factors such as journalistic professionalism and normativity were found absent within the profession. Objectivity, which many have argued is an important professional norm (Soloski, 1989; Schudson & Anderson, 2009, Kalathil & Boas, 2010), is obviously overlooked by supervisors in online news media when it contradicts the interests of the Party. Quality controlling (Canter, 2014: p.12), commitment to truth, and a sense of humanity (Steel,

2009: pp.584-5) can also be compromised for the purpose of maintaining a harmonious image on the Internet.

#### **6.4.4 Journalistic tactics**

Although the hierarchy is well established within the online news media and supervision is considered as suppressing press freedom, it does not mean that online news workers have to compromise completely. It has been argued that the development of the Internet has shaped the way Chinese journalists judge what is newsworthy (Zhao, 2000; Winfield & Peng, 2005), and has enhanced their awareness of professionalism (Pan & Chan, 2003: p.653). The media transformation has contributed in such a way that Chinese news workers have a normative commitment to public service. It was shown that there were some online news workers who were resistant to the pressure of censorship, and during the process of news production, resistant online news workers had developed tactics to respond to censorship. They used what I call “journalistic tactics” or “journalistic tricks” to ensure the integrity of the news content that they produced. “Journalistic tactics” was a term that developed from Tong’s guerrilla tactics (2009). Both terms refer to a number of tactics that online news workers in China used to ensure the safe mediation of information in the context of censorship. Tong (2007) explains that the use of these tactics can “avoid the political mine fields and yet meet their professional calling” in reporting investigative journalism. It was found that online news workers use similar tactics to meet their professional obligations. A significant example would be the “illegal strip club” story mentioned in the observation notes as follows:

##### **[Double teams on illegal strip club story]**

>An editor received an anonymous call, saying that there was an underground strip club in their town of Wenchen (a county of Wenzhou), next to a police station. The strip club seemed illegal. The source further said that the police had received many reports from the neighbourhood but the club owner was never caught red-handed.

>The source claimed it was suspected that at least one of the officers from the police station was corrupt; the police took dirty money and protected the club owner.

>Given the circumstances of a possible corrupt police station, the editor promptly proposed a tactic for reporting and precaution. Four journalists were sent to the scene for the story. They were separated into two teams. Team A went to the police station and reported for the illegal strip club, while team B took a hidden camera and went into the club.

>Team B aimed to capture a retreat scene in the club if the owner was informed by his 'mole-friend' in the police station - if there was any.

>The editor briefed the whole plan for both teams, and said he was looking forward to this big story. He asked the journalists to go for the story, and let him take care of the administrative work.

>The plan did not work. When team A, disguised as civilians, reported to the police station, two officers in the station refused to take any action. One of the officers said "there is no such thing (as an illegal strip club nearby)."

>Team A pushed again. They showed the officers their journalist IDs, and claimed they were led by a source. Again, the officer took no action.

>Team A recorded the whole incident with a hidden camera and edited the story. Although Team B did not capture the retreat from the club, the story was ready to go.

>The editor held the story until 6:00 p.m., 30 minutes before the online broadcast. He went into the online news supervisor's office and briefed the supervisor on the whole story.

>The supervisor made a call to inform the director of Public Security bureau of Wenchen, including the broadcasting time and theme, and further informed the director to 'take a look'. The director, showing a little sign of panic on the phone, asked: "which boss of yours should I speak to, if you could remove this news?" The supervisor replied reluctantly: 'my bosses are all off work now, the news is broadcasting any minute; there is no time (to remove it).'

Journalists and editors involved in reporting this story considered themselves to be 'winning a battle' with 'wisdom'. In the observation, news workers saw this kind of wisdom as their necessary asset. As one of the editors from the Wenzhou News admitted, some "journalistic tricks had to be played in order to report stories like this", otherwise the public would have little chance to learn the real news. To avoid an intense confrontation with the mechanism of censorship and the authorities, many online news

workers were encouraged to negotiate with the pressure of censorship in order to ensure the safety of online news content. As Tong (2007: p.534) argues, media control in China makes it more difficult for journalists to fulfil their journalistic ideals when they battle censorship. Thus, investigative journalists must “constantly search for the location of the ideological mine fields and consider the most effective reporting and writing tactics for going around them” (Tong, 2007: p.534). The example of the illegal strip club report demonstrates that this journalistic tactic can also be applied in online news media. It ensures the successful publication of the news content whilst bypassing the censorship of the authorities.

These journalistic tactics, however, are considered as the product of a combination of journalism training and journalistic practice (Soloski, 1998: pp.212-3). Arguably, Chinese online news workers may operate within a freer working environment than Chinese journalists who work in print and TV, but they still have to struggle with various forms of censorship: administrative interference, regulations and instructions from supervisors, surveillance by the publicity departments, and in the case of the ‘illegal strip club’ story, potential interference from other governmental officials who are irrelevant to news media. In the context of Singer’s (2003: pp.156-7) argument that “a commitment to truth over novelty or expediency is a core professional normative”, many Chinese online news workers would qualify as “professionals”, as they attempted and sometimes succeeded in serving the public with the truth.

It is worth noting that the use of journalistic tactics is considered as a temporary counter strike to administrative interference. Chinese online news workers may have improvised ways of practising journalism to balance commercialisation and political control (Lo, Chan & Pan, 2005: p.156), and use these tactics to ensure the safety of news content

(Tong, 2007). However, these phenomena are significantly characteristic of the current media transformation (Zhao, 2000; Hutters, 2003). What affect future developments of this transformation will have on journalistic practise in China remains uncertain.

## **6.5. Conclusion**

By observing and identifying the responsibilities of online news workers in the WN, particularly how they responded to censorship and what roles they played in censoring online news content, and revealing the operational process of online content censorship on its webpages, this chapter has highlighted one of the mechanisms of censorship within the online news media in China. Obtaining a description of actions, reactions and interactions between online journalists, editors and web administrators in the newsroom, it provides an account of how censorship becomes operational and influences the process of online news production, in which eventually the outcome of online news content was reflected.

The next chapter will focus on the analysis of interviews with online news workers. Attention will be paid to the protocol of reporting critical news, and how online news workers perceive their autonomy within the newsroom. Triangular models will be detailed which involve the cyber police, online news media and the publicity departments. This will interpret the power flow within the matrix of these three parties in Internet censorship, as they restrain but coordinate with each other to interfere or influence the processes of online news production.



# Chapter 7 Data & analysis III: Online news censorship and the perspectives of news workers

## 7.1. Introduction

Following the observation in the WN online newsroom described in chapter 6, this chapter addresses the issues of censorship of online news media from the perspectives of online journalists, editors and web administrators in China. Firstly, it looks at the censorship protocols by discussing self-censorship and editorial control in the newsroom. It aims to define the different levels of autonomy of online journalists and editors in the process of online news production, and their influence on the online news product. From there, the triangular models of online news censorship are analysed and detailed. The models consist of the online news media, the cyber police and the publicity department, which coordinate and restrain each other in influencing the output of online news content. The influence of online news on public opinion is addressed, and defined as providing leverage for online news workers to gain autonomy in the newsroom. Lastly, the chapter discusses the issues of what considerations the Chinese authorities make when deciding to interfere in the online news production, and what the perspectives of online news workers are in terms of their roles in assisting the building of 'harmony of the Internet' for the authorities. By addressing the liberalising effect that marketisation has had on Chinese online news media, this chapter also demonstrates how online news shift loyalty from the authoritarian state to financial advisor, and gain autonomy in reporting news against the pressure of censorship.



Therefore, this chapter aims to answer key questions as follows:

- 1) How do the Chinese online news workers respond to government censorship?
- 2) How can the existence of online censorship and propaganda in the processes of online news production be evidenced?
- 3) How do online news media gain leverage over the Chinese authorities by using their influence over public opinion?

## **7.2. Framework**

### **7.2.1 Interview setting and interviewees**

This chapter contains analysis of interview material based upon 6 interviews. The interviews were conducted from January 2012 to March 2013. An outline of the interview transcripts can be found in Appendix E. Again, like the cyber police interviews, the online news workers were labelled by numbers and remained anonymous as mutually agreed before the interviews. These six participants are labelled from P00 to P04, and P06, according to the sequential time when the interviews were conducted. In the text, they are also distinguished by their roles in the online newsroom. As explained in *Chapter 3: 5.3*, these online news workers are divided into three categories as follows:

Table 3 List of online news worker participants

<i>Code</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education background</i>	<i>Administrative status</i>	<i>Unit</i>
<i>P00</i>	F	24	Bachelor of Media Studies	Journalist	Wenzhou Evening Paper
<i>P01</i>	M	33	Bachelor of Publishing and Editing	Journalist	Wenzhou News
<i>P02</i>	F	30	Bachelor of Economics and Finance	Editor	Wenzhou News
<i>P03</i>	M	54	Diploma of Chinese Literature	Web administrator, editor	Qianjiang Evening Paper
<i>P04</i>	M	33	Diploma of Publishing and Editing	Editor	Wuhai Online
<i>P06</i>	M	39	Bachelor of Politics	Web administrator,	Qianjiang Evening Paper

All online news worker participants gave their full consent to the disclosure of information in this chapter. The coded names and their positions are used in the text to protect the identities of interviewees (*Chapter 3: 5.5.3 Ethics*). However in the process of analysis some descriptions of interviewees such as their relevant work units, educational status and administrative status, are necessary as these descriptions contribute to the credibility and reliability of the data.

### **7.2.2 Thematic outline**

This chapter opens with a discussion on what protocols are used by online news workers to censor online news content in China, and how these online journalists and editors self-censor through the different stages of the processes of online news production. It articulates how these online news workers respond to the pressure of censorship that comes from their superiors, and how they think their journalistic work is being influenced. Having different levels of autonomy within the online newsroom, online journalists and

editors are adapted to the culture of 'to think before you write' in the processes of individual conception and editorial control. This 'to think before you write' culture, is further defined as a political and journalistic term. This means that conceiving a news story for these online news workers requires not only careful consideration of journalistic values but also political sensibilities, like what potential minefield they may need to avoid while reporting a news story and to what extent the news story can criticise the government and its policies (Reese & Dai, 2009). It argues that during this process, news values can be downplayed in online news whereas the political concerns of avoiding a minefield and serving the propaganda purpose of the Chinese authorities are enhanced.

The second theme of this chapter is a detailed interpretation of the triangular models of coordination and restriction, the matrix which I argue presents the power flow between the online news media, the cyber police and the publicity department when they are involved in determining and influencing the output of online news content. Based on interviews, it focuses on discussion of how the authorities coordinate the online news as the influence over the public opinion of the latter appeared to be a leverage in the matrix.

The last theme identifies a number of issues that need to be highlighted in the process of analysis. The first sub-theme is identifying what considerations cause the Chinese authorities to interfere in the process of online news production and put pressure on the online news workers. Summarising from the perspectives of interviewees, four considerations are flagged up. They are 1) involvement at the scale of the public sectors, 2) practicality of converting critical news into public relations for the authorities, 3) degree of public attention, and 4) whether the Party's interests are infringed upon by the online news content. The second theme discusses the issue of what online news workers think and how they respond when their professionalism is undermined, but their roles in

assisting the building of ‘harmony of the Internet’ for the authorities are required within the hierarchy of online news organisation. The last sub-theme focuses on identifying the influence of internal competition on the process of online news production and online news content, and thus completes this chapter.

## **7.3. Censorship protocol of critical news**

### **7.3.1 Self-censorship, editorial control and autonomy in the newsroom**

This section looks at the operationalisation of censorship within the online newsroom, and specifically examines how the different professional roles of Chinese online news workers deal with inclusion and exclusion of news materials. This process of decision-making throughout the production of online news relies on what Palmer (2000: p.45) calls “a system of criteria”.

What can be considered self-censorship in this research? Defining the scope of the ‘self’ here is important because it was noted during observation and interviews in which journalists and editors kept talking about self-censorship but often referred to different notions and definitions of self-censoring. Horton (2011: pp.93-4) describes self-censorship as a restriction where people “deliberately” prevent themselves from expressing particular ideas and perspectives because it is likely to cause offence. But he also admits that this notion is not equally valued across all cultures. Petley (2009: pp.1-2) argues that freedom of expression is not absolute in China or in other democratic societies. Particularly in the context of Chinese news media, there are certain perspectives or information understood by Chinese news workers as not suitable for transmission into news content. Despite the news value of these perspectives or information, they are

considered politically sensitive and must be approached carefully in news production. These are what Tong (2009: p.595) called ‘minefield’ areas, or ‘propaganda minefields’. What caught my attention during observation and interviews on the notion of self-censorship or the process of self-censorship is that different participants have a different understanding of it. Considering the nuance in the scope of what is ‘self’, some news workers considered self-censorship to be evident in the final outcome of the news content, whereas others viewed it as a dynamic process of individual response to the pressure of censorship. The focus of the former is on the news product that is already done and presented to the public audience, and accessible through the online news outlet. It can be seen as an end product which has gone through the process of news production and has been complied amidst pressure of censorship from the authorities, such as what Petley (2009:p.3-4) exemplifies as: preventing contentious material from being produced, licensing of the press to enable control, listing banned work and forbidding people from both publishing or accessing it. The latter focuses on the dynamic process of individual journalistic practice , which involves judgment of newsworthiness, political sensibilities, and conception and composition of news material, along with briefing, discussing and compromising on the inclusion and exclusion of news content. It specifically pays attention to autonomy within the newsroom, where news workers have to judge to what extent they can produce news based on the sensitive material in their hands (Tong, 2007 & 2009).

At an early stage of the study, the notion of ‘self-censorship’ was considered as the online news media’s response to the government’s censorship policies. The word ‘censorship’ was used consistently in the observation notes and early interview transcripts to describe the Chinese government’s censoring actions and activities to control or manage the online news media. The online news media was seen as an undividable entity that came under

the pressure of censorship from the authorities and which responded to it. At this stage, ‘self-censorship’ was understood as the way in which online news media self-adjusted its angle of reporting (Figure 12), which was either produced by its journalists or generated by users. In Figure 12, the first model of self-censorship, the government and the online media group are seen as two opposite entities; the interaction between them is unidirectional. Moreover, it simplifies the notion of self-censoring by only looking at its external manifestation in online news. In this model, online news self-censorship is passive and submissive. It also suggests that the government and online news are hostile to each other. However, as the observation and interviews went on, the notion of ‘self-censorship’ was expanded, and the relationship between the Chinese authorities and online news was revealed, to some extent, as cooperative in the processes of online news production. Hence, different kinds of self-censorship within the newsroom were explored. This emerged as a significant factor during the interview stage, when interviewees were found to have different understandings of what exactly ‘self-censorship’ includes and excludes, and in some scenarios they were referring to different kinds of self-censoring.

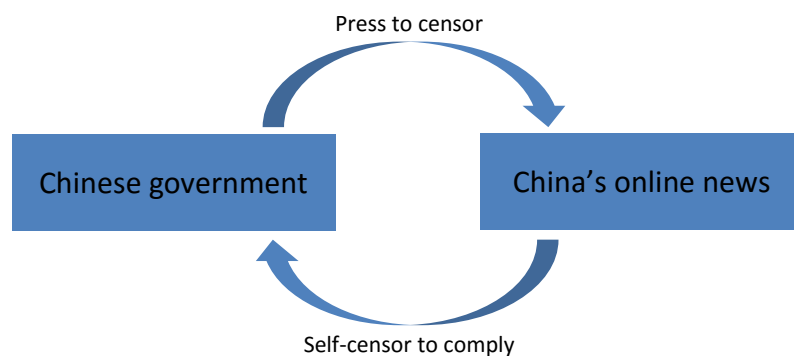


Figure 12 First model of censorship between the authorities and online news media

The following three segments are taken from transcriptions of interviews with P03 and P04, who described different types of self-censorship and censorship, in which some of

their response to censorship pressure, like being directly contacted and ordered to comply during the process of online news production, were also interpreted as another form of self-censorship within the online newsroom. The nuances were distinctive:

- a) *“The editor asked me to have a careful think about what angle I should choose. He always says ‘to think before to write’. I now say the same to young journalists, too. (...) But for some reports, journalists should understand that they would never have a chance to publish them, no matter what angle you choose. A young intern once brought me a report about local government involvement in hostile takeover of agricultural land. I can understand his passion... for trying to make things right. But a report (that criticises the government) like this can never be published” (P03).*
- b) *“The pressure (of censorship) could be shared. [...] And beyond that, having journalists providing their thoughts in the process of news production, made the work easier. We may work together and come up with new and insightful angles, and produce something more suitable for broadcasting” (P04).*
- c) *“If we didn’t turn off the search for sensitive words like ‘Jiang Zemin’ and ‘Hu Jintao’ (both were leaders of the PRC), then one day the secretary of the publicity director would call my phone in the office. From my experience, he would either tell you directly to turn off search engines for these sensitive words, or imply to you that your website might have crossed the line. (...) I rather prefer that they (the publicity officials) would tell you straight away, because otherwise I would have no clue of which sensitive words were forbidden, and tell my people to turn off the search for a lot of words, in order to keep out of trouble” (P03).*

Schudson and Anderson (2009: p.94) argue that in China the social function of the objectivity norm is different to that in Western journalism, for example, American journalism. The three sets of data above reflect this argument, as they highlight the taboos of criticising certain policies and careful discussion of the Communist Party’s leaders. These sensitive topics are not within the framework of a western understanding of news values, such as reference to elite people, negativity, meaningfulness (Brighton & Foy, 2007: p.7), importance, novelty, and story quality (Gans, 1980). In scenario (a), self-censorship was interpreted as a process of how news workers perceived the boundaries of writing publishable news. In this scenario, P03 was absolutely certain that, based on their experience, the report of a hostile takeover could “never be published”. The phrase

'understand' that P03 used suggested this type of self-censorship was a process of empirical conception, whereas in scenario (b), the self-censorship referred to an editorial process: editors and journalists working together for "insightful angles", and producing news stories that are "more suitable for broadcasting". Here, this teamwork in the newsroom was understood as self-censorship with the purpose of "sharing" the pressure of censorship, which came from the publicity department, as P03 illustrated in scenario (c). In scenario (c), P03 described another type of censorship: the online news media had to block the searching of key words by users, in order to comply with the publicity department. The pressure of censorship came from the publicity department in the form of instruction or implication. P03 phrased the instruction as to "tell you straightforwardly", or to "imply to you". And for the online news workers in the newsroom, this type of censorship appeared in the form of internal regulation, which P03 described as to "tell my people to turn off the search".

For situations like scenario (c), self-censorship still refers to an administrative instruction, as the first model represented. But on other occasions, self-censorship and the editorial process of online news production were incorporated in the perspective of participants. It also, therefore, refers to a process of individual conception or an editorial teamwork activity, as the scenarios (a) and (b) described. During the editorial process in scenario (b), online journalists and editors still continued their individual conception as in scenario (a) because the work of editing and sub-editing also required them to be mindful of where the minefield would be and what political taboo they should avoid. All together, these efforts in different scenarios were to ensure the online content, either produced by online news workers or generated by users, was substantially complying with the authorities.



These scenarios also reflect the characteristic of gatekeeping in Chinese online news media. It has been argued that news media in China are instructed to synchronise with the tone of the Chinese authorities (Goodman, 1990; Hu, 2007). From the perspective of historical development of communist propaganda in China, it is understood that nationalistic salvation has been adopted by the Party as one of the key concepts in its propaganda strategy. Although it occasionally appeared as anti-Confucian, Mao and his leadership integrated the idea of undermining individual liberty for nationalism and salvation (Chang, 2001; Han, 2006), and it became a significant strategy for propaganda ever since (Lam, 2009; Zhang, 2011). This radical strategy was arguably relaxed during the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao (Goodman, 1990). However, its essence still addresses the importance of media stability and synchronisation. The emphasis on maintaining an image of a harmonious society and developing the economy as priorities remains a guideline for gatekeeping in news media, online news included.

However, it is worth noting that different online news workers respond to internal censorship instructions differently. Significant activities exemplifying the online news workers' struggle and resistance were also found. A few journalists and editors challenged instructions and self-regulated to meet the standard more subtly. Also, there were a number of online news workers who were found to be taking a balanced attitude. The resistant acts against censorship pressure and ensuring the safety of online news content, hence, required journalistic tactics which some online news workers called "journalistic tricks" (*Chapter 6: 4.4*).

Against the compromised attitude, resistant online news workers blamed the journalism schools in China because they believed the schools did not fulfil the purpose of training professional journalists. Instead, young journalists coming from these schools yielded

easily. This is strikingly contradictory to some existing literature that had suggested journalism education improved awareness of professionalism in China. Xu *et al.* (2000) and Kalathil & Boas (2010), for instance, argue that journalism education is improving the professionalisation of the news media industry, assisted by marketisation and the development of the Internet. Being professional, in P03's words, is being 'honest, determined and tactical'. The young journalists-to-be were taught to be "oversophisticated and slavish", sarcastic terms that were used by P02 to describe what he believed was the result of an educational failure of journalism in China. By the time these young journalists-to-be left school, they were lacking imagination and creativity, and their resistance had been worn away. P02 worried that many young journalists came into the online news business without vigorous energy:

*"Here, I had a new employee. He had just graduated from a good university... a decent man with a good C.V. and good writing techniques. The other day, he wrote a story of [...] It was, for sure, not harmonious. So I said, 'we may not be able to put this on our website', He looked at me, and said, 'Okay, boss, you are the boss'. I felt terrible, because I didn't discern any unhappiness or anger in him. He didn't try to convince me or look for an alternative. It was clear that he knew how to obey" (P02).*

Journalist interviewees openly revealed their feelings about regulating themselves in writing stories. I labelled these confessions as 'self-censorship of individual conception' in the transcripts. Generally, the stage of 'self-censorship of individual conception' lies between the pre-production briefing and editing. It is a stage in which the online journalists internalised the pressure of censorship, self-edited the words of news stories and self-regulated the depth of reporting, based on their individual understanding of the administrative instructions. It is also a process through which they carefully deal with raw news material that needs to be categorised into either *inclusion* or *exclusion* (Harrison, 2006; O'Neil & Harcup, 2009). Bearing in mind political sensibilities, material that is

judged as ‘contentious’ (Petley, 2009: pp.3-4) or deal with ‘taboos’ (Tong, 2009: pp.607-8) may be excluded.

Usually, the conception process is followed by the online journalists when they are writing up stories on their own. Their sensitivities and personal knowledge and experience influence the way they write their stories. P04 interpreted this conception process as ‘to think before you write’.

*“It’s always important to remember, for a journalist, to think before you write. [...] I don’t like my interns to write me that kind of story... I have to go back to them and lecture them about not crossing the line or entering the minefield. Also, I don’t like to send journalists from my department to pursue a story that I am sure we’re not allowed to report” (P04).*

Individual conception is no doubt an almost certain universal requirement for journalists who write their stories, not only limited to Chinese online news workers. However, the distinctiveness of this individual conception in the online newsroom in China is that journalists and editors are consistently reminded by their supervisors to maintain the political correctness of online news content. For instance, in the WN, where monthly internal briefings and divisional briefings were set as important elements for the mechanism of Internet censorship, the journalists and editors were under a supervision which alerted them to keep political correctness in the processes of news production. Meanwhile, their personal judgment of the raw material also influences news content. Online news workers have to approach news material carefully and examine whether it is suitable for conversion into news stories without provoking the authorities. This is a practical phenomenon in Chinese online newsrooms where news workers “deliberately” (Horton, 2011: p.93) avoid including news material that may cause offence to the

authorities. The political concerns for these online news workers were reflected in their individual conception and eventually the news product.

Thus, the culture of ‘to think before you write’ seemed to be well accepted in the online newsroom, where it was not an individual approach but a journalistic routine that took political concerns into consideration. It differs from journalistic values of being objective; rather it is a process of probing, guessing, and avoiding the intolerance of the authorities, which relied on individual judgement and experience of these online news workers. When the online journalists were spontaneously ‘thinking’, they would have to “evaluate and balance the outcome and risk of reporting certain critical news” (P06) before they decided to report it. Moreover, aspects like the angle of reporting, word choice, and how far the authorities could take criticism were also important for individual conception. The news drafts that the online journalists produced after thorough evaluation and consideration were handed in to the newsroom, where the editorial process operated. The awareness of this political sensibility is therefore gradually adapted in daily journalistic practice. These particular ideas and perspectives of where the ‘propaganda minefields’ exist in China’s news media (Tong, 2009: p.595), also apply to online news.

The reason that the stages of editorial and administrative censorship are also labelled as ‘*self-censorship*’ in the transcripts and analysis is that the notion of these forms of censorship was developed from the first model. Arguably, the editorial process is also considered to be a process of self-censoring, as inclusion and exclusion are understood to be practices of the politics of self-censorship (Tong, 2009: p.594). The first model of self-censorship was expanded, and the second model of self-censorship (Figure 13) was generalised. Both editorial and administrative censorship can appear as self-adjustment in responding to censorship pressure from the Chinese authorities. Thus this self-

censorship was recognised as submissive rather than partially voluntary. The essential difference between editorial self-censorship and administrative self-censorship is that they are operated by different professions in online news. I developed a second model to focus on the online news organisation and refine the different degrees of self-censorship (Figure 13). In the second model exploring notions of self-censorship, editorial self-control and administrative self-regulation are distinguished in different colours (editorial in blue and administrative in red). Bearing in mind that the intention of self-censoring news material is to comply with instructions from the Chinese authorities (Petley, 2009: pp.101-2), editorial control is considered to be a stage where self-censorship of both the individual online news workers and the editing/sub-editing process occurred. Administrative control, on the other hand, continues its institutional obligation after the production process in the newsroom. Overall, Figure 13 illustrates how these mechanisms of censorship within the online newsroom examine, digest, and filter online news content which may pose a threat to the Chinese “monopoly on power” (Petley, 2009: p.101), and ensure the exclusion of this content.

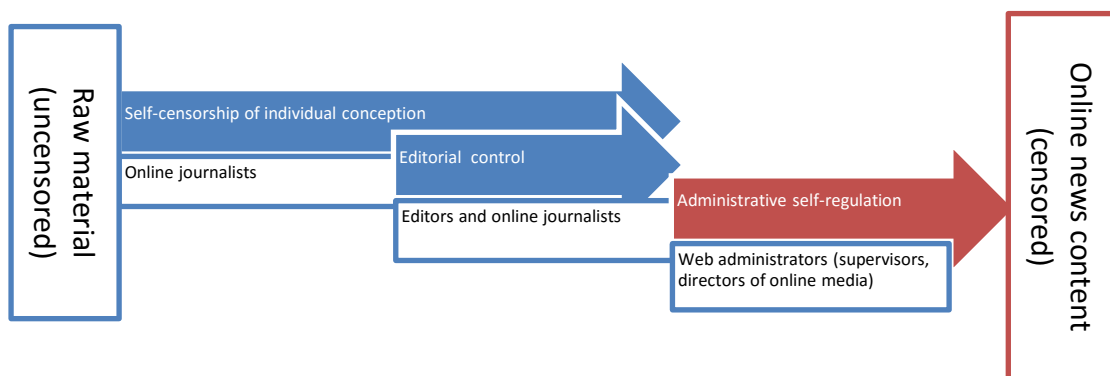


Figure 13 Second model of online news censorship: distinction between individual conception and editor control in the online newsroom

As Figure 13 indicates, conception and editorial self-censorship have overlaps. Online journalists may continually self-regulate their news content at the editorial self-censorship stage. The significant difference between conception and editorial censorship is that the former is not necessarily interactive whereas the latter often requires discussions and negotiations in the newsroom. Many interviewees called for journalistic professionalism in this process, as they believed journalists could be more active and less submissive to the pressure of censorship from their superiors. As P02 argued:

*“A journalist who offers his or her input (in the editorial self-censorship process) is not only tolerated, but also welcomed. I like my journalists to talk to me, why they choose the story, how they think, rather than take on board my editing unconditionally” (P02).*

Editor interviewees also stressed that they would like to see more interaction in the newsroom in the process of editorial self-censorship because they believed that, with the involvement of online journalists, the process of editorial self-censorship could be more insightful and thorough. As P04 argued:

*“The pressure (of censorship) could be shared. [...] And beyond that, having journalists providing their thoughts in the process of news production, made the work easier. We may work together and come up with new and insightful angles, and produce something more suitable for broadcasting” (P04).*

Some editors prefer editorial self-censorship to be a process filled with discussions, negotiations and collaborations. They believe that this kind of atmosphere enables online journalists to share the responsibilities of self-censorship in the newsroom, and so the weight of pressure that comes from censorship regulation could be shared. In contrast, editors said that some online journalists' submissive style of accepting every piece of advice from the editors was surprisingly not welcomed.

However, the interactive atmosphere which editors preferred in the newsroom does not equal the editors' preference for journalistic proactivity in the industry in China. The hierarchy in the newsroom determines different levels of autonomy for different professions. Editors appear to have more influence on the output of news content, and may be perceived as disobeying the superiors. Chapters 6: 6.3.1 and 6.4.1 discuss the intolerance of insubordination in the newsrooms. The construction of online/offline news organisations, previously reviewed by Zhao (1998), Lee (2005) and McNair (2009), for instance, ensures that instructions coming from superiors are considered mandatory, with little room for discussion at the lower level. In this sense, the dynamic of the production process may be limited due to the hierarchy. How the autonomy of online news workers is restrained, is discussed further in Chapters 7.5.1 and 7.5.2.

An 'over-active' or 'over-resistant' (P03) journalist may trouble the editors. Editors are, after all, more dominant than online journalists in the hierarchical structure in the online newsroom, and editors intend to keep it this way. Although the editor interviewees stressed several times that they saw all categories of online news workers as equal, the results of the observation suggested otherwise. Editors normally held a higher position in the online newsroom, and in the decision-making process within the newsroom it was down to the editors to make the final judgment. In short, editors normally have more autonomy than online journalists, and they were often in charge of making the final decision in the newsroom. The language that interviewees used also underpinned this hierarchical difference. Journalist interviewees called their editors 'bosses' at times in the interviews, which was evidence to suggest the editors' dominance in the relationship.

The process of editorial control can be seen as a result of the development of gatekeeping. In his discussion of the transformation of gatekeeping in online news media, Canter (2014)

argues that the traditional gatekeeper becomes a professional verifier of online news media. This section examines how these Chinese online news workers fulfil their traditional roles of acting by using the Internet as a news medium, a role that Canter (2014: p.112) outlines as watchdogs, quality controllers, analysers and storytellers. However, evidence has also shown that there is a certain degree of resistance in online newsrooms, where internal ideological and power struggles play out (Lam, 2000: p.42) and motivate online news workers to strive for autonomy. In terms of political sensibilities, ambiguous criticism of the authorities, officials and government policies, these are arguably sensitive areas that online news media have to approach carefully. Hence, this type of criticism is limited, controlled and constrained (Hong, 2006: p.299). The gatekeeping ensures that this criticism gets filtered in the online newsroom, and that the official doctrine for “constructing a modernised socialist country” (Hu, 2007) is propagandised. In the era of undergoing media transformation (Zhao, 2000; Huter, 2003) and press commercialisation (Zhang 2000; Winfield & Peng, 2005), advocating this doctrine may seem like a difficult task as perceived by the authorities. It prioritises the interests of the authorities in the process of online news production, but undermines a set of news values which are commonly seen by western academics as important to consider in the process of composing news, such as for instance, relevance, timeliness, unexpectedness, meaningfulness, and predictability/unpredictability (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Briton & Foy, 2007). Although there are differences in understanding what the exact propaganda minefields are for individual online news workers, the bottom line for online news organisations is to synchronise their tone with the Chinese authorities, which cannot be achieved solely through the use of mechanisms of censorship in the newsroom.



### 7.3.2 Manipulation of images

Most self-regulating and self-adjusting of text means overwriting the original content and wiping out any trace of censorship, which often makes it difficult to access the original content and conduct a comparison (Jones, 1999). However, the censorship of images sometimes does leave traces that show the images were altered. For this reason, censorship of images is singled out in the analysis. This section explains how these traces of censorship were retrieved, and analysed, in the views of online news workers, why these images were shaped by photo journalists or editors during the news production period.

Here, in this research, ‘photo journalists’ are distinguished from ‘online journalists’, who are responsible for producing text content. Attention was paid to photo journalists as their image products, mainly pictures and video footage, can only be amended or revised with difficulty, yet their rank in the media is equivalent to online journalists and their autonomy is insignificant. P01 described a case of image censoring which was considered as both dramatic and regrettable. He and his crew took pictures of the village chief and ‘his hired accomplices’ carrying hammers, shovels and hoes while ‘marching to a farmer’s house’, forced the farmer to move out of his own house, and dismantled the house violently. The pictures were later disapproved by the web administrators because they were considered as ‘posing a threat to a harmonised government image’:

*“We took a clear front shot of the village chief and his hired accomplices, with all kinds of hammers, shovels and hoes. [...]A typical story of forced relocation with violence. A very powerful image, I should say. But it clearly had a very subtle touch to some... (pause) nerves. These kinds of powerful pictures are hardly seen by the public” (P01).*

The above statement can be seen as an example of how online news content is censored according to the requirement of harmony. As such, the gatekeepers of online news have

to consider the readership of the authorities when dealing with sensitive topics, which Zhao (2000, p.3) calls the media orbiting the party state. For public audiences, newsworthy factors behind the coverage of an event, such as timeliness, unexpectedness, negativity and its social and community relevance (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Brighton & Foy, 2007: pp.7-10) are arguably what makes the story valuable. However, for gatekeepers in online news, the potential threat of disrupting a harmonised government image can overrule them all.

As mentioned in *Chapter 3: 5.7*, it is difficult for research to access examples of censored news content, because once these contents have been deleted, they may have been erased permanently for recovering. However, some news images provided precious data for this research. Not all these pictures are retrievable in their original version but, due to the uniqueness of the image content and rough photo-editing technique, some of them had clear signs of manual editing. One typical failure of photo editing was caused by poor editing technique.

A picture from an infamous article “*official paying visit to the elderly*” (Tencent News, 2013) caused controversy. It reported an ordinary story of officials paying a visit to elders, through a clichéd narrative intended to enhance the likability of the government officials. However, this PR intention was undermined by poor photo editing. Some clear marks gave away the inauthenticity of this photo: the outline of the image of the elder is clearly retouched and pasted from another picture, the size of the elder does not match with the officials, and the colour and transparency composition also indicates that this news photo was edited and altered with at least two other photos. The flaws in the editing may not be obvious in terms of textual content, but images can reveal the marks of distortion in

certain circumstances, as this picture demonstrates. Even without comparing it with its original version, the photo exposed what had been censored and edited.

Apart from the poorly performed journalistic norm, this photo exemplifies the core of Confucianism thought which says that individuals should obey rational principles in the interest of the state (Gardner, 2003). The clumsy photo editing caught the public's attention and stirred some doubts and criticisms of online news manipulation. It is reported that Chinese users doubted the authenticity of the news story itself, questioned whether the story actually happened or was just a staged event, and criticised media ethics (Sina News, 2013). To confront these doubts and criticisms, the local online news media reluctantly came forward and released other unedited photos of the same event in order to prove that the news story was genuine but the photo was tampered with because of 'imprudent mistakes' (Tencent News, 2013). The media spokesman explained that the original reason behind the editing of this photo was that the photographer was an intern and he failed to capture all the officials and the elder in one proper photo. The editor chose to merge two photos into one because he was not satisfied with any of the photos taken by the photographer. In other words, the essential reason behind this incident was that the genuine photo did not meet the standard for its use as propaganda. The editor compromised the authenticity of the news image in order to coordinate the common interests of all the parties concerned, including having 'all officials in one proper photo' (Tencent News, 2013).

These examples show evidence of the existence of manipulation of images in online news media. As mentioned earlier, censorship of images is different from textual censorship because editing and revising photos is more difficult than for text. Even without being able to compare the raw versions, photos that have been edited and tampered with by a

rough hand may expose the fact that Chinese online news media is censoring images as much as it is censoring texts. Here, the purpose of propaganda is considered a more important function for news stories than other values, such as truthfulness and authenticity. Photo journalists, who are ranked at the bottom of the media hierarchy structure, often possess little autonomy within the online newsroom. To sum up, the cases of clumsy photo editing exposed the fact that Chinese online news media downplay the importance of news pictures. Thus, I cannot but conclude that the function of propaganda in pictures can be considered more important than authenticity, and it overrules other news values in online news production in China.

#### **7.4. Triangular models of online news censorship**

This section looks at the mechanism of censorship from the aspects of coordination and restriction. Deriving from field notes and interviews, the triangular models of online news censorship (Figure 14 and 15 below) are the most crucial findings of this research. They were refined from observation and part of the general protocol from the interview transcripts, and used to demonstrate all the important aspects discussed in this study, including the autonomy of online news workers in the newsroom, journalistic professionalism and news values in China's context, and the operationalisation of censorship in the process of online news production. The models aim to explain and demonstrate how the newsroom functions under systems of censorship and control.

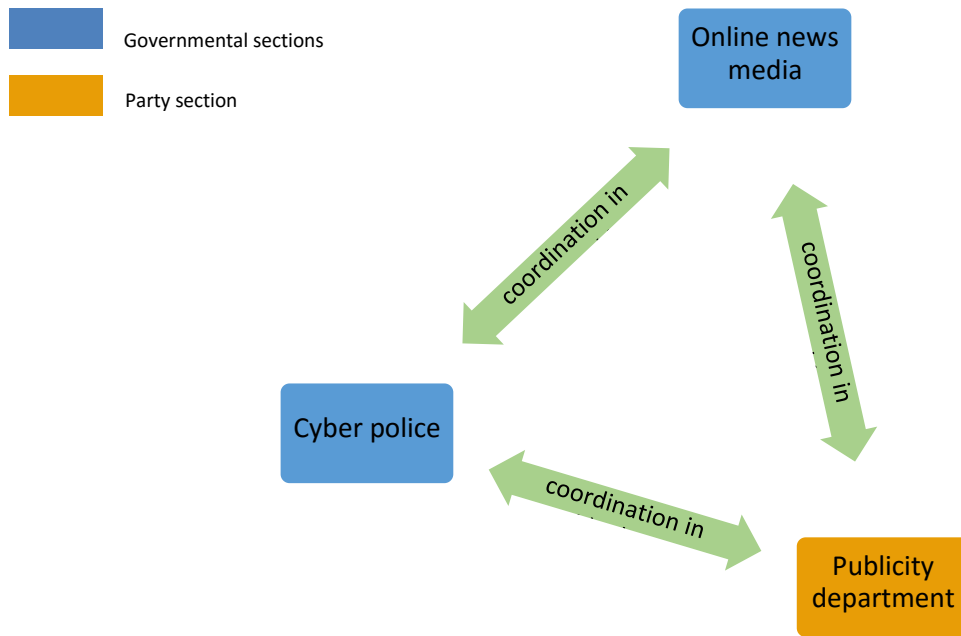


Figure 14 Coordination triangular model of online censorship

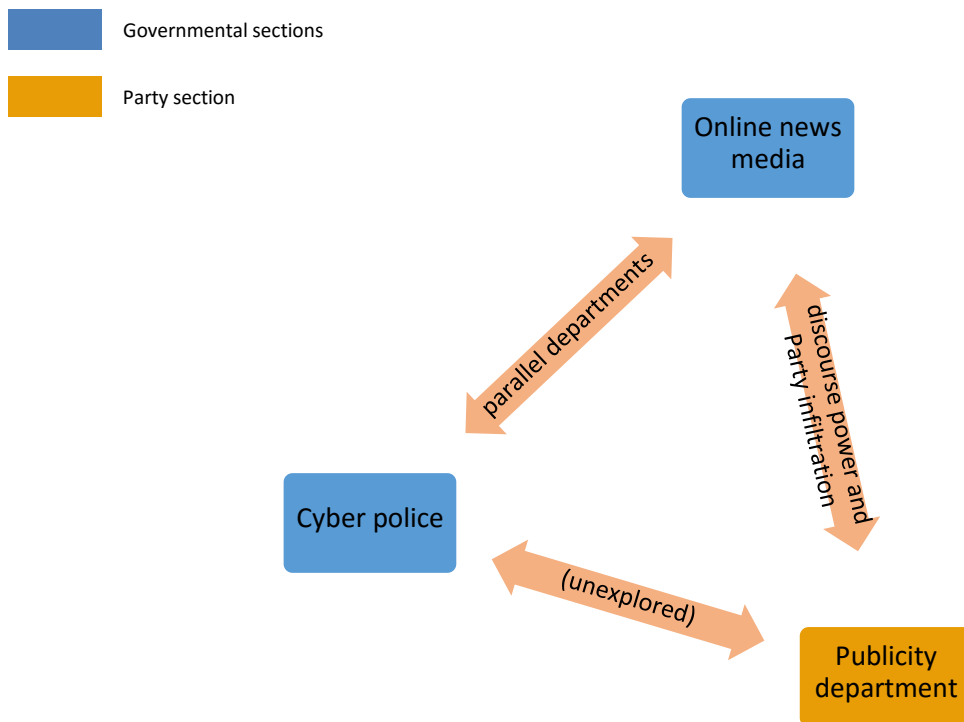


Figure 15 Restriction triangular model of online censorship

The models consist of three entities: the online news media, cyber police, and the publicity department. The green arrows represent their relationships in coordination, while the red arrows represent their relationships in restriction. The models present a stable and fundamental protocol of online censorship where all three entities coordinate and restrain each other. They form two enclosed matrices.

#### **7.4.1 Coordination between the authorities and the online news**

One of the core words in these triangular models of dynamic mechanisms is ‘coordination’. Much literature indicates that China’s online news media are manipulated and oppressed by the Chinese authorities, and that online news media self-censor the news content they produce passively and reluctantly (Qin, J. L. 2000; He, Q. L. 2004; & He Q. L. 2008). The impression given by some existing literature suggests that, if pursuing freedom of speech and freedom of press is unquestionably ‘*a just and ethical virtue*’ (P02) for journalists, the Chinese government and the Communist Party must play the role of the villain. The Chinese authorities are against freedom and liberty and ruthlessly censor and bully those news workers who are striving for ‘just or ethical virtues’. However, the Chinese online news workers may find that the notion of ‘virtues’ is ambiguous in their journalistic practice. From the observation, the impression that authorities and online news workers were in opposition was found to be arbitrary and biased while other literature suggests there is a trend that press commercialisation has shifted media’s loyalty from the authorities to its financial supporters (Pan & Chan, 2003, Esarey, 2005; Tong, 2009). The development of the Internet is arguably an important factor that accelerates this process (Zhao, 1998 & 2000; Yang, 2003). This dynamic change explains the relationship between online news media and the Chinese authorities. Online news workers have autonomy in the process of news production which government officials now cannot arbitrarily interfere with. For instance, in the observation, officials described

online news workers as ‘news friends’ and complimented them as being publicly influential by saying “times have changed; you news friends have a powerful pen to write with and we old comrades have to catch up.” This can be interpreted as a friendly gesture from the authorities as the result of online news media’s influence over public opinion. A sign of willingness to coordinate was shown; the authorities were not always aggressive, and the news workers were not always weak and submissive. All three entities in the triangular matrix possess autonomy in the news production and post-production period. It was not as simple as a dramatic case of the evil authorities versus the just and virtuous news workers.

The triangular models present fluid loops where all three entities involved are active, communicative and coordinative. The coordination between the cyber police and the online news workers is detailed in the previous chapter (see *Chapter 6:4.3*). Here, this section pays attention to the coordination between the publicity department and the online news.

The publicity and the news departments have a close relationship: the decision-making level administrators from the news shared a similar ideology with the publicity department; irregular meetings and briefings were held between them regarding the orientation of public opinion, and there were frequent exchanges of opinion during incidents such as natural calamities and man-made misfortunes. For example, in the case of Bo Xilai’s downfall, the publicity officials reacted instantly with the cyber police and web administrators of WN to draft joint guidelines for news reporting. The guidelines aimed to instruct journalists and editors; they included strategies for media coverage of the incident and favourable angles that would potentially direct public opinion about this

important story. These guidelines and regulations were instructed in a top-down form, which P03 described as follows:

*“I was informed, and I passed this to my men in office, I didn’t want to see Bo Xilai in our pages at all. It is not journalistic, it’s political” (P03).*

P03 pointed out that in circumstances such as this, journalistic values could be sacrificed because the purpose of maintaining harmony of the Internet ought to be served. P02 recalled a similar situation:

*“We were told not to investigate the story of Bo Xilai and Wang Lijun (Bo’s former trusted follower and whistle blower), no matter how exciting it might be” (P02).*

Evidently, directives for critical news coverage are the outcomes of these timely meetings and briefings. I prefer to call these outcomes ‘directives’ rather than ‘protocols’ because they can be flexible in operation, and appear changeable and negotiable at times. The flexibility of the directives is embodied in different ways. Firstly, the scope of the directives may be vague. Directives normally include a summary of a few topics that the media should avoid reporting; for instance, in the Wenzhou train crash the instruction specified that news ‘*should* report less accountability and investigations’ and ‘*avoid* releasing pictures or news about casualties *which may arouse public criticisms*’ (P00). A number of interesting terms have been used to reflect on the relationship between online news media and the authorities. What has been suggested by Zhao (2000), Winfield and Peng (2005) about the impact of financial autonomy on news content is also found applicable to online news media. For instance, the use of moderate and suggestive terms such as ‘should’ and ‘avoid’ rather than strong terms such as ‘must’ and ‘prohibit’, and the vague term ‘which may arouse public criticism’ suggests that the instructor did not



strictly stipulate the boundary of news exclusion. As a result, the force of these directives is debatable, as some news that seemingly violated the directives was still published.

Secondly, these directives were not delivered in hard-copy but by word of mouth. Here, it is worth re-visiting the field notes of the monthly internal briefing, as the directive of censorship from the publicity department was delivered via the Deputy Director's words (*Chapter 6: 4.1 & 4.3*). This suggests that the publicity department lacked written protocols to direct online news in reporting emergent incidents. To some extent, the publicity departments coordinate with the online media rather than instruct the news workers. This leads to the third aspect of flexibility: the publicity department's lack of systematisation in overseeing the online news.

From the perspective of the Chinese authorities, neither the publicity departments nor the cyber police have the resources to censor online news thoroughly. P03 called the rapid growth of online news an 'information boost', and this boost may trouble the authorities a great deal in online censorship. The cyber police adopted a technical approach to supplement its manual filtering, whereas the publicity department used briefings to control the online news. Therefore, the flexibility of directives can be seen to be the result of unsystematic flaws. Disciplinary actions against the online news might be happenstance, as the authorities' subjectivity left enough loopholes for those online news workers who violated the directives not to be disciplined.

The lack of systematic control and flexibility reflects Lam's argument about institutional loopholes that allow news workers to circumvent limitations (Lam, 2000: p.42) The existence of loopholes in online censorship and the vague nature of the directives from

the censors (publicity department officials, cyber policemen, and even news supervisors) enhanced the importance of self-censorship of individual conception in the news production process, because online news content that is not well-conceived may result in deleting or denial of publication. For online journalists and editors in China, the directives may be vague, but restrictions and administrative interventions are decisive. For certain online news content whose news angles or word choice are not well conceived to comply with the authorities, its producers may find that their efforts in news production are wasted once they are instructed to delete. This goes back to, again, the need for online journalists and editors to internalise the vague directives, and probe and guess how much criticism the authorities can tolerate based on their personal judgement and journalistic experience. Overall, a significant finding of this coordinated relationship between online news media and the Chinese authorities verifies some of the theories that had been discussed in theoretical frameworks and literature. As their financial autonomy is gradually gained, online news workers are in a position to make decisions on inclusion and exclusion according to their public audiences. The authorities, on the other hand, appeared less hostile to online news organisations and their interference in the process of news production had shown signs of cooperation.

#### **7.4.2 Autonomy and influence over public opinion**

Another important aspect of the triangular models is that they present another force that operates between these three parties but has hitherto been ignored: restrictions. The red arrows in Figure 15 represent the dynamic cycle of restrictions, and between every random two parties, a red arrow represents a directive force that I call 'restrictive'. The restrictive between online news media and cyber police was discussed in the previous chapter in terms of the equality of governmental institution ranks. That is, regional online news and cyber police are ranked at the same institutional level in the government. This

means that neither of them has the administrative authority to overrule the other in their routine work. In this chapter, attention is paid to analysing the restrictive power between online news and the publicity department, while the restrictive power between the cyber police and the publicity department will be discussed in *Chapter 8:2.1*, as it is unexplored and needs further study.

The effective restriction leverage for online news is recognised as this media platform's influence of the public. The officials and civil servants were found to be afraid of the public's influence, as P05 indicated that he had witnessed how this influence translated into media supervision of civil servants. From the observation, a phrase that had been frequently used and can support this theory: 'news friends'. It meant friends from the news industry. When officials from the publicity department visited and inspected WN, the phrase 'news friends' was mentioned several times. One of the officials said, and here I quote: "times have changed; you news friends have a powerful pen to write with and we old comrades have to catch up." It is worth noting that publicity officials called the online news workers 'news friends' and complimented them as being 'powerful', which can be easily interpreted as a friendly gesture. Further, they called themselves 'old comrades'. This can be seen as self-deprecation: admitting to being 'old' and to 'have to catch up' (with the changed circumstance or changed time in this context) is presumably a representation of weakness. The inspection might still be an inherited demonstration of the Party's control over the online news media, but these deliberately worded details reflect the publicity department's misgivings about the influence of the public ('a powerful pen') that online news possesses.

Another unexpected phenomenon was the existence of a harmonised relationship between board members of online news and the publicity department. P02 described it as follows:

*“The boss (the director of WN) has a good relationship with the publicity chief. It helps our work, and especially benefits journalists on political and economic news. We have journalists corresponding with government officials and publicity supervisors on a regular basis. These people from the government (and the Party), after all, are an important source.” (P02)*

There is a reasonable explanation for this harmonised relationship, though it was expected at the start of the research to be a tense one. Chapter 5 shows that the cyber police had learnt that neither they nor the publicity department possess sufficient manpower and material resources to maintain a refined online news filtering operation. When critical news is exposed on the Internet, the authorities have to adopt an extreme approach to fix the potential negative influence. Although these approaches for disciplining news workers (*Chapter 5: 4.3*) have clear boundaries and are well systematised, their deterrent force is weakened. Thus, the briefing meetings within the online newsroom are more often used to prevent critical news reports which potentially would damage the harmony of the Internet.

The model also observes that the Internet and the popularity of online media have helped China to transform authoritarianism and pursue the “objective of building democracy and free media” as noted by Kalathil and Boas (McNair, 2009, p.241; Kalathil & Boas, 2010). In terms of striving for their autonomy in the processes of online news production, this study found that Chinese online journalists learnt to harness their influence over public opinion in their journalistic practice. The authorities, on the other hand, are found to be constrained by media supervision, which corroborates McNair’s (2009) argument. At the current stage of *transformation* (Kalathil & Boas, 2010) or *reformation* (De Burgh, 2003), the disagreement between Chinese online news media and the Chinese authorities was unavoidable. Nevertheless, Chinese online news workers did find themselves in the

position of having autonomy and being able to leverage with the authorities. In addition, it has been argued that the anti-traditional reformists of the media, particularly in online news, opposed the forces and ideologies of Confucianism (Lee, 2005: p.109). The Confucian proposition of sacrificing individual freedom for the benefit of the masses, along with traditional philosophical schools of morality and channelization, are embedded culturally and historically within the communist political philosophy. This is where the southern media in China stood up as a significant player against censorship.

In sum, what needs to be highlighted is the confirmation of autonomy in the online newsroom, where online journalists and editors do not submissively accept instructions and comply with them without resistance. Apart from their call for professionalism (McNair, 2009; Tong & Spark, 2009), autonomy cannot be gained without media transformation, reformation of organisation, and the changing of political landscape. Social culture in China may still advocate traditional morality and limited freedom embedded in Confucianism, but the marketisation of online news has already had an impact on the output of news content and has shaped the way Chinese online news workers understand their transitional nature and political vigilance in journalistic practice. The criticism of government policies and individual officials before the era of media transformation may be seen as an act of anti-socialist or anti-nation salvation, but may now be tolerated by the authorities as a result of commercialisation.

### **7.4.3 Southern media: an example of online news media's autonomy**

An important new angle from this research's observation and interviews is that significant attention has been given to investigating Chinese online news media organisations and exploring their complexity and relationship to power. Some literature that studied China's censorship, media control and digital filtering techniques treated China's online news

media as an inseparable entity (Qin, 2000; He, 2004; & He, 2008), but they often neglected issues of the dynamic struggle in the political, administrative or ideological levels of the entity. The complexity of the contradictory phenomena and inner mechanisms in the online news industry are too valuable to be ignored. Zhao (2000) argues that the current process of media transformation has created a paradoxical phenomenon. The market force has intensified for news media and has shifted media's loyalty; while financial autonomy is gradually gained and market competition increased for some news media, the party has shown little sign of lessening control over the news (Esarey, 2005, p56). As stated earlier, this research aims to explore and analyse these mechanisms by looking at the contradictions, news incidents and phenomena from the perspectives of observer, interviewee and institution insider. I acted as an observer and interviewer throughout the processes, while the cyber policemen and news workers contributed their intelligence and thoughts as institutional insiders. One of the findings from the institutional insiders was that there is a censorship divide in China's online news media industry, and it can be substantially distinguished in a geographical sense. The geographical distance from Beijing, China's capital city and political centre, is crucial to the restrictive power of media censorship. Media located closer to Beijing usually endure more censorship pressure from the authorities, whereas the southern media in Guangzhou Province, located further from Beijing, are protected from the pressure to some extent.

How southern media strives and struggles for autonomy can be considered as a living example of paradoxical phenomena. The 'liberalising effect' (Esarey, 2005: p.56) that media transformation brought about has conflicted with the reinforcement of authoritarian control. The southern media is a group of liberal and uncompromising media organisations that maximise the media's restrictive power in China. Most of them are located in the south. The *Southern Weekly* (SW) is often seen as one of the leading media

organisation in the camp of the southern media. In recent years, SW has launched several campaigns against online censorship and has presented itself as a radical and trenchant opponent. P02 spoke highly of their resistance and bravery:

*SW enjoys support from their local government and readership, so they can sometimes write what they really want to write, criticise what really needs to be criticised. [...] We once said that if all of us had the guts to do so, we would have a different situation in censorship now. (P02)*

However, P02 and other interviewees also admitted that one important reason that SW excelled in resisting censorship is its geographic advantage. Guangzhou is geographically distant from the capital and beyond the reach of the full intervention force of the central government. Also, Guangzhou has earned a historical reputation for being radical and revolutionary, and its recent rapid economic growth has also given it a crucial status in China's political landscape (Jian, Sachs & Warner, 1996). In other words, it is believed that these historical and economic reasons have assisted the media in the territory to reduce the influence of Beijing's centralised media control.

By reviewing Guangdong's revolutionary history and emphasising its economic status (see context details in *Chapter 1: 4.2*), it is understood that the southern media were heavily influenced by the aggression and liberal spirit of its regional tradition. It is reasonable to deduce that the SW and other southern media have inherited this distinctive revolutionary character, and the region's economic strength sustains its influence of the public in China's political landscape.

At present, this distinctive revolutionary character may not require the presentation of violence, bloodshed or uprising as it did a century ago, but the spirit of pursuing liberalism

and resisting authoritarianism were inherited from Guangdong's early revolutionists (*Chapter 4:7*). Here, the liberalising effect of southern media is attributed to the call of journalistic professionalism, which is arguably imported primarily from "outside China" and systems driven by "blatant commercialism" (Lo, Chan & Pan, 2005: p.156). The southern media often appear as liberal pioneers, showing their discontent with interference from the authorities. Their economic wealth and geographical distance from Beijing have helped the southern media to develop rapidly and more freely (Latham, 2000; Zhao, 1998). Their social influence has sharply expanded in recent years as several domestic debates were launched and spread from the south to the north. These debates included sensitive topics such as anti-corruption, constitutionalism, overseeing the government, and political and economic reform. In this sense, the southern media news workers indeed used their restrictive power efficiently. From the perspective of efficiency, the southern media have achieved positive effects that are admired by their northern peers. As P04 said in praise of them:

*"They (the southern news workers) truly have a pen that can write. That is, to me, very admirable" (P04).*

This admiration from other news workers may seem minor but it indeed describes the effect that positivity of media transformation and commercialisation has had on journalistic professionalism in China (Pan & Chan, 2003; Tong & Sparks, 2009). On the other hand, the authorities still maintain control over online news. In 2013, the newsroom staff of SW protested against censorship because SW's New Year special editorial was changed under pressure from propaganda officers bypassing the normal publication flow (Xinhua News, 2012). The content of this special editorial was interpreted as leaning towards questioning and criticising the *Chinese Dream*, a political slogan proposed by President Xi Jinping (Xinhua News, 2012). After gaining support from other news



workers and users, the incident was escalated to include massive demonstrations on the Internet. For example, users were voluntarily posting pictures of lit candles, a symbol of good wishes, on Sina Weibo to show their support for the SW (Cao, 2013). But the protesters soon compromised after their actions backfired on Sina Weibo, and a number of SW's administrators were removed from their posts. After President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang came to power in late 2012, they highlighted 'enhancing the culture of inclusiveness' and 'advocating free thought and free press' on several occasions (Xinhua News, 2013, People's Daily Online, 2013; & Sina, 2008a). These speeches were interpreted as positive signs of political reform and a better prospect for free speech, because the leaders of PRC had demonstrated their attitude of allowing criticisms of the authorities (inclusiveness), and they were willing to loosen restrictions on news media (advocating free press) (People's Daily Online, 2013; & Sina, 2008a). However, incidents such as SW's New Year special editorial contradict the authorities' claims. The intention behind their claims to enhance the culture of inclusiveness and advocate free thought was therefore in doubt. Throughout the incident, it is worth noting that news values such as truthfulness and sense of humanity (Steel, 2009: pp.584-5) are highlighted by southern media journalists. The advocacy of these news values reflects western models of news values (Harrison, 2006: p.13; Brighton & Foy, 2007, pp.7-9; O'Neil & Harcup, 2009). At times when these news values were contradictory to the interests of the Chinese authorities, southern media journalists strived for autonomy without institutional interference. It demonstrates Zhao's (2000) and Winfield & Peng's (2005) claim that financial autonomy encourages Chinese news workers to produce market-oriented content, which may minimise or oppose the effect of the interests of the Party in the process.

This brings us back to the question: can the southern media be a liberal example in China's censorship over the news media? Or even further, can it be a pioneer against China's censorship over all forms of news media and other online content? A pessimistic perspective is that it cannot be, because some interviewees were convinced that the southern media's activeness and radicalism were containable within the overall framework of media censorship. In other words, their activities and radicalism are limited by the authorities. Underneath the active and radical surface, the authority's control over news content, distribution and web portals is strong and unshakable, and the Party's permeation of the southern media is no different than other news media. As P02 argues:

*“Most media like us (Wenzhou News Group) are alike, and so are online news media. We couldn't be licensed if we didn't structure as the government requested. That's why you can hardly find a news website that overturns this institutional structure totally and starts with an original one with zero Party influence and intervention. We have our Party branch, and Mr Wu (the chief editor) is also our Party branch secretary” (P02).*

The institutional nature of the southern media determines the limits of their resistance as their structure was built under the heavy influence of Party infiltration. By examining the triangular models of online news, government sectors and the Party, it is understood that the triangular models ensure the authorities' stable control over online news. Meanwhile, it is claimed that the key purpose of supervising online news is stabilisation (Liang & Gao, 2011; & Xiao, 2010). Recent incidents, which were initiated by the southern media and the social influence they have brought, were insufficient to convince the state and the public to reform the mature propaganda machine and the established censorship system. Moreover, the media cannot challenge censorship as long as its staffing is heavily permeated by the Party. Unfortunately for Chinese liberals, the spirit of pursuing freedom and professionalism that the southern news workers demonstrated is admirable and prospective, but not necessarily rewarding. For a force that aims to challenge a powerful

and well-established state machinery, the mere spiritual encouragement that the southern media provide is insignificant. On the contrary, the liberal sparks may lead the authorities to tighten censorship. As mentioned earlier, Guangdong has an important status in China's political landscape. The growing trend of liberalism from the south has brought potential threats to the stabilisation policy. Evidence has shown that the authorities are tightening controls in the south: for instance, the SW and other southern media have been re-staffed dramatically (Xinhua News, 2012), and Hu Chunhua, a member of the Central Politburo of the Communist Party of China (CPCP) and a promising candidate among the next generation of Chinese leadership, was appointed as Party chief of Guangdong in late 2012 (Sina News, 2012a)

The discussion on the southern media presents an example of how news media use their influence over public opinion to negotiate, leverage and struggle for autonomy. In the incident of 2013's New Year special editorial, the southern media had demonstrated a fragility in the framework of the current mechanism caused by the absence of clear-cut laws (Lam, 2000). The "vague media laws and regulation" (Lam, 2000: p.37–46) that encourage self-censorship among news workers have the same effect on online journalists and editors. However, by the time that self-censorship begins to be rejected by online news workers, the whole system on which censorship is built, may also stop functioning. In this regard, the struggle of the southern media implies a refusal of general acquiescence to censorship and self-censorship. As the triangular model of restriction demonstrates, Chinese online news workers use media's influence over public opinion to gain their autonomy in the newsroom.

## 7.5. Exceptions and protocol breaks

In this research, one important question that needs to be answered is whether the online censorship protocol in China is systematic. The significance of this question is that it can contribute to many aspects of this research: it can clarify the mechanism for Chinese online news workers to report incidental critical news; it can interpret how Chinese online news workers balance interests in producing critical news; it can further testify to Chinese news workers' professionalism, as being less dependent on political power and being a distinct occupational group with a distinct social function (Tong & Sparks, 2009) under the pressure of censorship; it can also contribute to our understanding of news values and user-generated content by studying how these online news workers carefully approach sensitive topics and avoid provoking the propaganda minefield (Tong, 2009: p.595).

As the general workflow of online news media demonstrates (see detail in *Chapter 6:2*), throughout this general protocol, online journalists, editors and web administrators were all involved. In this general protocol, journalists may include reporters, photographers and correspondents; some journalists may even take over editorial responsibilities for their editors. As P04 said:

*"We are short of manpower (of editors). For some less important news stories, daily stuff, I leave experienced journalists to edit and decide. I also give them my full trust; their judgment abilities are good enough to make safe news" (P04).*

All interviewees affirmed the existence of the general procedure of online news production, but they also admitted that real-time news production might not always follow the protocol. Situations could change, and for critical incident reporting, journalists and editors were required to process the news differently and accordingly. The phrase 'safe

news' suggests that playing safe was arguably the goal of adapting these different approaches to producing news, in order to tactically balance both political uncertainty and financial advertisers (Zhao, 1998; Lo, Chan & Pan, 2005: p.156).

The term 'critical' started off as defining news stories about either scandals, accidents, fraud, corruption, bankruptcies, people going missing or dying, or any stories that might give the audience negative feelings about society. It further refers to those news stories that bring negative images and criticisms of the government or the Party to the public. Critical stories about official scandals, corruption, accidents involving abuse of government power or misconduct, or too many people missing or dying in a short period that may affect the officials' political careers can activate the protocol of online censorship. As P01 said:

*"We may be asked to downplay the scandals and corruption, unless we are instructed to report them on a large scale. The government sometimes wants to desalinate the negative effect [...] It depends on how negative and containable the effect can be" (P01).*

Therefore, to determine the protocol of online censorship, the negativity assessment of critical news is the key. This section looks at considerations of interfering with online news production. By discussing and comparing incidents of Wenzhou's train collision and Bo Xilai's downfall, it examines what intrigues Chinese authorities' vigilance. In addition, it further discusses the influence that a growing awareness amongst online news workers of being professional and committed to reporting news without fear or favour and commercialisation have had on the process of online news production.

### **7.5.1 Considerations of interfering with the online news production for the Chinese authorities**

This section attempts to analyse what factors can influence the negativity assessment of critical news, and illustrate how this assessment impacts on online news reporting. From the triangular models, it was asserted that coordination and restriction are two main factors that enable three players (online news media, cyber police and Party publicity) to dynamically interact and operate online news censorship. The models demonstrate the mechanism of online news censorship and explain many phenomena of routinisation that occurred in China's online newsrooms.

As argued, the Internet in China is built by the authorities to support and maintain its demand for economic growth, while also controlling threats to its authoritarian status (Petley, 2009: p.101). Manufacturing a public image of a harmonious society in the media is so important to the Chinese authority, that journalistic professionalism and normative can sometimes be compromised (Hong, 2009: p.299; Tong, 2009: p.607).

However, there are some exceptions that cannot be eliminated. In some extreme cases, this triangular power-flow may be broken. In these cases, the three parties are unbalanced, and therefore the models are not suitable for extreme cases. One of the recent extreme cases was the Bo Xilai incident: online news media did not enjoy much freedom in topic selection and coverage range when the incident involved sensitive information about national security and political struggles in central government. Online news had little autonomy in updating the public about news of Bo Xilai compared to the newspapers and the television. On the contrary, when the news became less intense or related to political struggle, online news had more flexibility in providing updates. P03, who had experience working in both newspapers and websites, compared their differences:

*“Unlike the newspapers, where every step of news production had established gatekeeping, the online news in China is new, and there are a great number of blanks to be filled. We don’t filter and deliberate over every single detail of the news on a daily basis. As long as the story is not as sensitive as Bo Xilai’s case, online news has more flexibility than newspapers” (P03).*

Here, the questions are: what was the key element that made the difference to online news media’s liberty in covering the train crash and in attempting to report the Bo Xilai incident? Furthermore, if some previous literature has argued that China’s free speech environment was improving because the rapid development of the Internet allowed people to access more varied news and to discuss political issues freely (He, Q. L. 2008.; & Wu. Y. 2012), why was censorship tightened up for the Bo Xilai incident more than for the train crash that happened two years earlier?

The essential difference between these two incidents is their different level of infringement of the Party’s interests. The train crash might not be a natural disaster, but an accident. The news had the potential to be converted from a tragedy into a PR campaign. The crash brought massive public attention to civilian casualties, railway transport, first aid and medical treatment, rescue and other relevant public services, whilst the authorities had to face growing public fury over the crash (Branigan, 2011; Moore, 2011). Silencing news of the collision was impractical. However, by using certain PR strategies, the collision was converted into a campaign of shaping a positive image. P00 recalled the details of what happened after the collision:

*“We didn’t write features to accuse, or to question why the tragedy happened. [...] Our position in reporting this, as we were instructed, was clearly and obviously advocating that Wenzhou was a city of great love” (P00).*

Thus, after the collision, media and journalists were instructed to shift news angles from investigation and accountability to other stories that might help in shaping this ‘positive image’, like the spirit of utter devotion and the sparks of humanity that had been seen in medical workers, firemen, police and even civilian volunteers who participated in the rescue. To some extent, the shaping campaign alleviated the pressure and criticism of the railway service.

In contrast, the Bo Xilai downfall was dramatically different, as it had little potential for the same strategy. Bo Xilai and his associates were recognised as being heavily engaged in high-end political struggles. There were fewer public sector actors involved, and public attention was unable to access confidential details of the central government. Silencing the news was, in this sense, easier.

The above comparison helps this research to identify different censorship approaches that the Chinese authorities use for different critical news. Respectively, the online news media have to handle censorship pressure according to the nature of the story. It is argued that the triangular models illustrate the routinisation of online news censorship, where three different parties are coordinated and restrained in a dynamic flow. However, in exceptional cases, the autonomy of online news media can be downplayed by the extreme means deployed by authorities. This comparison further projects the mechanism of identifying extreme cases; that is, cases that can be considered so ‘extreme’ that the authorities have to ignore the media’s influence of the public, break the triangular power-flow and overrule the online news, even if that means running the risk of being criticised.



### **7.5.2 Professionalism vs harmonisation**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, some news workers appeared to struggle with instructions they received that were in contradiction to their professionalism, such as being objective, reporting without political interference (Pan & Chan, 2003: p.653), and articulating society's conscience (Tong & Spark, 2009: p.340). It appeared that not all news workers were clear about the differences between government departments and Party institutions, as the image of the government and the Party is often presented as a united one to the public. However, all news workers know the importance of maintaining a harmonious atmosphere between different departments and institutions. Although during the interviews, online journalists and editors emphasised the importance of journalistic professionalism and ethics in the newsroom, I cannot but conclude from the observation and interviews that handling the reporting of critical news in a "harmonious way" seemed to be compulsory for Chinese online news workers.

As mentioned in *Chapter 3: 4.1*, the culture of harmonisation has a historical background which can be dated back to Chinese feudal times. It was developed by Hu Jintao, the former president of China, as an emphasis on the importance of keeping a stable economic development trend and maintaining the mood of social harmony at all times. It appears that his philosophy of harmonisation derived from his early claim of avoiding self-inflicted setbacks (Goodman, 1990) and became the guideline for the stabilisation of government (Tang & Iyengar, 2012). From the perspective of online news media, the political climate of harmonisation means critical news can easily be treated as a trigger for instability. Hence, online news workers starting work on a critical story have to carefully choose either to report it professionally or to avoid sensitive angles and play safe.

The media transformation arguably assisted the development of journalistic professionalism in China (Chan, Lee & Pan, 2006). This development has also been witnessed amongst participants in this research. The journalist interviewees and one editor interviewee (P02) recalled that they chose journalism as their career because they were convinced that it was a profession that would allow them to pursue a higher cause; in their terms, 'to pursue the truth for the public' (P02). This cause may be interpreted differently by different news workers, but its essence generally includes a number of values that are present in liberal contexts, such as feeding news to audiences, satisfying the public's right to know, revealing and exposing injustice and social evils, devotion to journalism, and making sure the voices of the weak are heard. Objectivity was addressed and highlighted by interviewees as a norm that makes them 'true journalists' (P02), which Tong and Sparks (2009) call a distinct occupational group with a distinct social function. The sense of being objective in news reporting arguably emerges out of a combination of public intellectuals articulating society's conscience alongside a reoccupation with western ideas of journalistic professionalism (Tong & Sparks, 2009: p.340).

However, online news workers believed that the harsh environment of censorship in the industry has worn down their honourable passion for journalism, since some of them still do not feel any less dependent on political power. The censorship pressure on online news media was as rigorous as on print media. As P01 admitted:

*"We are also ruled by the government (as well as newspapers and magazines), the same department and the same regulation. After all, [...] the government tightened the regulations" (P01).*

Likewise, editors believed that there would be less difference between the pressure on online news media and print media. Both online journalists and editors recognised that

the mechanism of censorship for Chinese online news media was well established: the government and the publicity department established a triangular model of authority with leading administrators of online news media, and the authorities having the dominant power over the online content. The dominance of this triangular model of authority will not be weakened by the openness of the Internet and the dynamic development of online news media. This dominant status is also an important reason for Chinese online news workers to adapt journalistic tactics (*Chapter 5: 5.3*) in order to ensure the safety of online news content in the context of censorship and meet their professional calling.

However, as argued earlier in this chapter, the key to stabilisation and harmonisation is the obstruction of free speech and a free press. The demands for political reformation and a liberal media can be suppressed by accusations of instability or threatening harmonisation. This minor resistance and these small “journalistic tricks” from experienced online news workers merely scratched the surface of the censorship system. Although online censorship has flaws in its objectivity, execution and consistency, it is still a powerful state-owned machinery sustained by a resourceful government and a mighty infiltrative Party. The propaganda portrait of China’s Communist Party as the saviour of the nation (Wu, 2010; Chen 2014) may not be as important as it was during wartime and before 1949, however, building an image of a harmonious society is still a mandate for the Chinese authorities. IAt a time when this political agenda is conflicted with professionalism, Chinese online news workers have to make subtle choices between complying with the instructions of their superiors and persisting to produce objective stories. By reviewing a body of literature, this study has established that media transformation and commercialisation has already made Chinese online news a freer place with less institutional interference, however online news workers still face a significant commitment to publically resisting the political demands of the authorities.

### **7.5.3 Internal competition and commercialisation**

In the early stage of observation it was noted that the WN had considerable autonomy and marketing flexibility, as it had its own financial management, personnel management and marketing strategy. The director of a local online news operation such as WN could make decisions on sponsorship and advertisement, and the recruitment of editors, journalists, photographers and other employees. Market consciousness, as noted by Xu *et al.* (2000: p.75), is seen to be gradually awakening in China's journalism education, and testing the limits of the authorities' tolerance for news media pushing boundaries and violating traditional normative of propaganda. Xu *et al.* (2000) also argue that what has so far been taught in journalism school might not completely reflect journalistic practice, however, the study also found that this situation is changing.

The online news media's management has created internal competition among the online news, forum and blog/microblog divisions within the organisation. The different divisions operated with relative independence, as they had their own supervision, budget and staffing. The chief editors of these sections were not only responsible for the news production, but also for obtaining funds from commercial contracts. For instance, exclusive advertisements were displayed on the homepage and individual news page of the online news, and the funds for an internal party were raised by a number of sponsors. Some commercials and sponsorship were signed by the chief editor, whereas others were signed by the Director or the Deputy Director. The tendency of the online news is market oriented.

There was clear evidence that the existence of internal competition was intense. Editors mentioned that they sometimes experienced ‘a little bit of stress’ because their chief editors needed to compete with their colleagues from other sections over commercial income, and sometimes the chief editors asked them to share the pressure by looking for sponsorship. This suggested that the responsibilities of the editors extended to revenue control.

Interviewees also indicated that the primary reason that different sections of WN were competing with each other was that sections needed to gain more commercial income. As P02 said:

*“The board decided a long time ago, maybe even from the establishment of WNMO, that we (departments) had to sort out most of our funding ourselves. So we have to have more hits for our webpages as more hits means more money [...] I have cameras and microphones that need to be updated, mouths to feed, programmes to run; they all cost” (P02).*

The need to gain commercial income is believed to be the driver for the website’s concentration on market-oriented news content. Editors and supervisors had realised that the importance of improving the website’s market attraction was as important as developing its competitiveness. P03 recalled his ten-year experience in the online news industry, and admitted that there was a trend of transformation from the mode of ‘planned-economical-like’ to a more market-oriented one:

*“For some local events, we are allowed a certain liberty in writing our own investigation reports. This is a step forward compared to 10 years ago when I entered this business for the first time. We were completely monitored and instructed by the publicity department, but now I can freely encourage my journalists to go out and find me interesting stories. [...] The interesting stories that can attract people’s attention and feed their appetite” (P03).*

In this sense, online news workers are more inclined to produce news which will feed the appetite of the public audience, in order to gain popularity for the websites and attract the readership. On the other hand, web administrators also demand the facility to attract sponsors which will financially maintain the running of the online news organisation. Evidence shows here that what the market consciousness has brought to online journalism is optimism, as the “testing ground” (Xu *et al.*, 2000: p.75) has extended from journalism training to the online newsroom. This study has established that marketisation in online news media has had a liberalising effect on the industry, and has significantly contributed to the freedom of press. This includes a growing awareness of professionalism amongst online news workers, a loosening of dominant control by the authorities, a shaping of the understanding of ideological vigilance, and a shift in media’s loyalty from the Party to its financial advertisers. All in all, marketisation is arguably a glimpse of light breaking the existing mechanism of censorship in online news media in China.

## **7.6. Conclusion**

By discussing the censorship protocol of critical news in online news media, this chapter develops and articulates the triangular models of online news censorship where the online news media, the cyber police and the publicity departments restrain and coordinate to influence the production of online news. It also demonstrates the different layers of censorship in the process of news production, as self-censorship of online news workers, editorial controls and autonomy in the newsroom for different professional roles are interpreted from the perspective of online news workers. A number of aspects are defined and refined, such as the manipulation of images, negativity assessment of critical news, and the journalistic struggle to maintain professionalism and ethics in the face of the prevailing political climate.



## Chapter 8 Conclusion

Numerous scholars who have studied Chinese news media have argued that the news media in the country started going through a process of transformation in the last few years of the last century (Zhao, 1998 & 2000; de Burgh, 2003, Winfield & Peng, 2005; McNair, 2006; Petley, 2009; Tong, 2009). From being an integral part of the communist propaganda machine, the news media have become a significant element of commercialisation in China. The process of this transformation involves a number of aspects that influence the mechanism of censorship of news media and aspects of journalistic practice in newsrooms. In this context, some have argued that the development of the Internet in China accelerated the process of this commercialisation in the online news industry (Xu, *et al.* 2002; Pan & Chan, 2003; Esarey, 2005; Lo, *et al.* 2005). A review of theoretical frameworks clarifies the academic fields in which this study is located, and how the shift of online media's loyalty from the authoritarian state to the market has influenced journalistic practice and online news content. The literature review, on the other hand, focuses on the historical development and construction of news media in China. It provides historical and social context to censorship protocols of online news. The review reaches the conclusion that, while marketisation is having a liberalising effect on the news industry and free press, the Chinese authorities are not showing signs of lessening their control over online news. Therefore, through an analysis of observation of an online newsroom, and interviews with cyber police and online news workers, the findings of this research contribute further to the understanding of how the mechanism of censorship is operationalised, what is happening within the online newsroom, and how online news workers process the pressure of censorship. This thesis therefore provides a unique account and analysis of censorship and protocol of Chinese online news media.



In answering the four research questions that were posed in *Chapter 1: 1*, four points of analysis are explored respectively in this chapter, in order to expand the analysis of reactions to censorship of online news media in the previous chapters within a broader context of mechanisms of Internet censorship in China. The first section draws a model of the mechanisms of online censorship, which presents five different levels of censorship and identifies the functions of different kinds of mechanism that are used by the Chinese authorities. From there, it further discusses how these mechanisms are operationalised. The triangular models which demonstrate the power flow between the cyber police, the publicity departments and online news media reveal how these three parties coordinate and restrain each other, in order to influence the output of online news content. The mechanisms of censorship within the online newsroom are operationalised via internal briefing, editorial control and self-censorship of online journalists and editors. Thirdly, the section discusses how online news workers experience and perceive censorship; it particularly looks at the stage of editorial control and individual conception of online news production, where they need to respond to the pressure of censorship that comes from the Chinese authorities, and to make their individual judgements about whether the news content that they produce can be considered as harmonious. Lastly, the section looks at how the mechanism of online censorship impacts on the journalistic work of online news workers, who are required to bear in mind the political correctness of online news content that they produce.

## **8.1. What are the mechanisms of online censorship used by the Chinese authorities?**

One of the aims of looking into different forms of censorship mechanisms in China is to explore the intellectual justification that supports the censorship of Chinese news media. In other words, one of the important questions of this study is “on what basis do the Chinese authorities censor the news media?” There are a number of interesting elements and discussions on the relationship between the construction of Chinese news media and the authorities who control it. For example, Petley (2009: p.101) argues that the Chinese communist party organisation within news media allows the authorities to control news content and ban that which they believe may pose a threat to its monopoly. The hierarchy of news media ensures the leadership of the party, and its instructions can be passed down to specific news organisations and news workers (Zhao, 1998: p.14-9). Chinese journalists are also politically obliged to support the dominant ideology as part of their roles in the newsroom (McNair, 2009: p.241; Lee, 2005: pp.117–21). Thus, this study has examined how these ideas permeate the newsroom and operationalise censorship, and concludes that the need to maintain the harmonious society, or at least the need to portray an image of the harmonious society in online news, is key to answering the ‘why’ question outlined above.

‘Harmony of the Internet’ is arguably one of the most important concepts within the context of censorship of online news media, seeing as the notion of the ‘maintenance of the harmonious Internet’ is thought to be the main factor driving the cyber police to pressurise the online news media, and for the online news workers to censor news content accordingly. The concept of harmony may be traced back to feudal times in China (Hucker, 1975). By looking at the development of harmonisation in a historical context

in China, Confucianism was shaped, developed and integrated with the concept of harmony. The early political proposition was interpreted as an embracing gesture for media supervision (Tong, 2011, p.23), which suggested an open and free environment both inside and outside the party's circle. But political climate rapidly changed. News workers were no longer encouraged to conduct investigative journalism and play the role of holding political power to account from the late 1960s, when liberalism was criticised as a corrupting influence that may threaten the solidarity of communist comradeship. A contemporary interpretation was advocated by the political agenda of Hu Jintao, the former president of the PRC from 2005 to 2013. His proposition of harmonisation focused on the priority of maintaining social stability and developing the economy in China, and avoiding the self-inflicted setback of political struggles (Hu, 2007). This proposition was interpreted as a sign of emphasising "stability maintenance" (*Wei Wen*, in Mandarin) in China, and constructing social harmony, which was portrayed as having a decisive role in "... the mission of re-rise of Chinese awakening and revival" (Hu, 2007). This thesis has demonstrated that the proposition reflects a strong historical inheritance from the propaganda tactics of the Chinese Communist Party, in which national salvation and salvation in journalism are integrated with the stability of the Party's monopoly. National salvation is a significant, if not crucial, element that the Communist Party uses to unify the majority and reinforce its dominant state (Goodman, 1990; Chang, 2011; Han, 2006). In news media, advocacy of the Party as the saviour of Chinese nationalism addresses the importance of stability and synchronisation, through which an image of harmonious society is maintained (Hu, 2007). The proposition of harmonisation is interpreted, in this research, to have had enormous influence over the construction of online news, as Brandt (2008), Harwit, and Clark (2001) argued that this is how a policy from the central government in China can shape the construction of the news media industry in the whole country. Therefore I cannot but conclude that the mechanisms of online censorship are

constructed in a way which attempts to ensure that the authorities can oversee and censor online news media, and serves the purpose of maintaining a harmonious Internet' environment.

As this thesis has demonstrated, forms of online censorship are varied, from technological deployment such as GFW, and pre-installment filtering software, to public security and administrative control of online news. However, the common purpose that underlies these mechanisms reflects what Petley (2009: pp.3-4) outlines as “preventing contentious material from being produced”. An inverted pyramid model of online censorship in China is drawn to demonstrate the variety and functions of censorship that the Chinese authorities have established. It consists of five levels that are applied by either social or technological means, or combinations of both. Not all of these mechanisms are effective, but a failure of one can be amended or adjusted by another. For instance, when the regulation for compulsory pre-installation of filtering software in personal computers failed, the GFW, which can filter online content via scripts and code algorithms, provided additional support for online surveillance (Bristow, 2009). This research specifically pays attention to another four kinds of mechanism. These four mechanisms are: public security monitoring, administrative gatekeeping, editorial control in the newsroom, and self-censorship of online news workers. These four forms, which are derived from analysis of fieldwork data, are significant to the findings of this research.

The public security monitoring is controlled by the cyber police, the police force who are responsible for monitoring and filtering online content by means of technologies and manual scanning, and together with the publicity departments pressurising the online news media to censor online content. As the pressure is applied top-down, online news media use internal briefings and supervision to remind and regulate online workers to

comply with the censorship. The supervisors in the online newsroom, though, who were found to have little participation in the process of online news production, are mostly members of the Communist Party and have sensibilities towards sensitive news content. Their functions in the newsroom are considered as political rather than journalistic. The assessment of whether a news story is over-critical is also reliant on the individual judgement of these supervisors. Little evidence has been found to suggest that there are systematic guidelines for the boundaries of political correctness or sensitive topics, as the directives that come from the authorities keep adjusting, and supervisors therefore have to determine these boundaries by their experience and understanding of the political climate.

Working at the bottom of the hierarchy of online news organisation, editorial control and self-censorship are the last two mechanisms that complete the picture of censorship of online news media. Apart from their roles in the journalistic field, online journalists and editors are responsible for monitoring user-generated content and being pseudo commentators. These two roles, that are seemingly irrelevant to online news production, are detailed in *Chapter 6:4.2* and are worth re-addressing here: user-generated content monitors are required to do random searches for user-generated content and delete that which may pose threats to the harmony of the Internet, whereas the pseudo commentators are required to generate online content that is favourable to the authorities and synchronise the perspectives of users on the news pages. The role of being pseudo commentators is unique in online news, as the procedure of creating and pretending users is inapplicable in newspapers and TV. What has been observed here shows that in order to present to the public an image of the harmonious society, the censors are willing to – consciously or unconsciously – commit as such and create fake readership of the news. The discussion on user-generated content monitoring is, therefore, not limited to

discussion of professionalism or journalistic norm, but manipulation of the public opinions and objectivity. However, the fault of this malfunction of online news should not be laid on specific news workers. It is the whole system of censorship, which allows – perhaps even indulges – the manipulation of journalistic professionalism, should be responsible for.

Overall, as chapters 5, 6 and 7 demonstrate, the construction of online news media and cyber police both ensure the Chinese authorities can influence the process of online news production and news content. The Chinese media has always been an important component of the CCP's propaganda machine and the image-building of solidarity. The image of solidarity is socially accepted as the foundation for maintaining a harmonious society and a developing economy in China. The construction was firmly established in TV, newspapers and radio before the media transformation (Zhao, 1998 & 2000), and now the authoritarian control has extended to the online news organisation.

## **8.2. How are the mechanisms operationalised?**

One of the main contributions of this thesis is its examination of how censorship protocols are operationalised, and the formulation of the triangular model is a key finding of this research. At its core, the model recognises the different forces at play between the authorities and online news. A number of significant concepts such as journalism professionalism, news values, construction of online news media, and editorial process of censorship can be related to the context of Chinese online news through this model. In addition, the power flow and interaction between the authorities and the online news are expanded and detailed in this model. In the very first model, the authorities were understood as the arbiters of censorship pressure, whereas the online news was at the

receiving end. The interaction between them was unidirectional. Within this context, censorship of online news media is a passive and submissive approach: online news workers digest the pressure by conducting self-censorship on their online content, and delete, amend or alter their content in order to meet the requirements from the authorities.

In addition, news briefing within the online newsroom ensures ideological control over online news. It allows directives to be effectively passed down from the Chinese authorities to individual online news workers. Within the online news organisations, the leadership of the authorities and the political demands of supporting the ideology can be ensured (Zhao, 1998; McNair, 2009). The institutional function of news briefings therefore affects the process of judging newsworthiness and news content.

The triangular model of online censorship was further developed, and used to explain the power flow between online news media, the cyber police and the publicity departments in influencing the output of online content. The Chinese authorities coordinate with online news media to censor the online content that appears on the websites, whilst they also restrain each other in the matrix. The authorities fear the influence over public opinion of the online news, as online news can produce content criticising the government and its policies to a certain degree. On the other hand, the online news media are restrained by its hierarchy within the framework of Chinese governmental structure, and the power of sanctions that the authorities possess. In this sense, the models express the mechanisms of Internet censorship for level 2 and 3 by exploring the relationship between the authorities and online news media.

The authorities' protocols of overseeing the online news and the different attitudes of the cyber police and the publicity departments in pressurising the online news are detailed in *Chapter 7: 4*. In short, the authorities' control over online news media is achieved by their overpowering hierarchy and imposition of sanctions on those who fail to comply with the censorship. The sanctions are not only used for disciplining the online media organisations, but also for those users who generate content that poses threats to the harmony of the Internet. Also, through coordination with the publicity department, online news media who fail to comply and allow the existence of this user-generated content would be sanctioned. This is a decisive method of management for the authorities, to control and sanction online news media by pressurising the online news workers to regulate their online content. By doing so, the authorities exercise their deterrence on the online news media, forcing the online news workers to be alert. In this sense, the existence of cyber police arguably undermines the professionalism of online news workers. Some aspects of journalistic professionalism that have been discussed by western schools of thought, such as objectivity, quality, legitimacy and credibility (Soloski, 1989; Drechsel, 2000; McNair, 2009; Schudson & Anderson, 2009), are also not relevant concerns for cyber police. Since their mission of maintaining the image of hegemony for the Chinese authorities is important above all else, cyber police also disregard some common news values, such as negativity, meaningfulness (Brighton & Foy, 2007: p.7), truthfulness, sense of humanity (Steel, 2009: pp.584-5), novelty, and story quality (Gans, 1980), as such values are meaningless and not relevant to their profession. The existence of the cyber police in the background conducting their activities out of the spotlight so to speak, adds to the sense within newsrooms that journalists are required to conform to appropriate norms of behaviour. In this sense, censorship and control are *internalised* (Jansen, 1991) because of the existence of such an office.



Hence, the development of this model was seen as one of the crucial findings of this study, because many of the other findings were derived from studies that based themselves on the notion that ‘online news media has its own autonomy’. In the online news, chief editors and directors were found to have power to negotiate with the officials; the rising southern media were seen as the optimiser of the online speech environment; censors’ fear of disclosure could also be leveraged by the supervision of public opinion, as censors were afraid that the exposure of their personal activities would threaten their political careers; and a large number of non-compromised online news workers existed in the newsroom.

The triangular models present fluid loops where dynamic interactions, leveraging and negotiation were involved. ~~These dynamic acts were not found or reviewed in the previous literature because they were not recorded.~~ Some articles indicated that the online news media was submissive, and the Chinese authorities were manipulative (Qin, J. L. 2000; He, Q. L. 2004; & He Q. L. 2008), whereas others had argued that the mechanism of censorship and the news workers’ responses to it are dynamic and transforming (Zhao, 2000; Lo, *et al.* 2005; Esarey; 2005: p.56; Chan, *et al.* 2006). The triangular models support the latter.

The triangular model also explains the necessity of coordination for the authorities in a time of happenstances, which might develop due to critical news. From the perspective of the authorities, coordinating with the online news could provide the solution for several problems of online censorship:

1) Neither the publicity departments nor the cyber police have enough resources to censor online content thoroughly. Both of them have to press the online news workers to self-censor, with the assistance of the news’ supervision system.

2) The ideological control from the publicity department was unsystematic. Publicity departments used briefings for pre-production periods in order to keep the online news workers in line. Some instructions were flexible and vague as they were debriefed by word of mouth. Thus, the publicity department needed the supervisors and directors of the online news to regulate and discipline their employees.

3) Neither the publicity department nor the cyber police could interfere in online news production, as they were afraid of the public facing influence of the public that online news workers had. Therefore, coordination was chosen as a better solution.

Another focus of the mechanism of Internet censorship in this research is to explore how it is operationalised within the online newsroom throughout the different stages of online news production. Firstly, briefings in the newsroom which are regularly scheduled are observed to be a significant method for web administrators to deliver censorship instructions from the authorities to news workers. The responsibilities of supervisors are particularly to remind and orientate online journalists and editors to maintain the political correctness of news content. The existence of supervision is important for the mechanisms of Internet censorship within the online newsroom as a way of highlighting political considerations for the news content.

### **8.3. How do online news workers experience and perceive censorship?**

It was noted that cyber police have responsibilities in overseeing and censoring online news media in China. To be specific, they are responsible for overseeing the online content that is produced by online news workers and generated by users. This is a

significant mechanism that pressurises the online news workers to conduct censorship in the processes of online news production, whilst filtering and monitoring the user-generated content on the news pages. This mechanism fits a number of tactics Petley (2009: pp.3-4) analyses as available to an authority to effectively control and censor news content. The pressure that comes from the cyber police is also understood as a main force for online journalists and editors to self-censor. In the processes of conceiving news and editing and sub-editing during news production, online journalists and editors have to make judgements for online content about whether it would cross the line.

This thesis also highlights how the pressure of censorship influences the process of news conception and how individual online news workers deliberately avoid discussing politically sensitive topics in order to avoid trouble for both themselves and the news organisation. These sensitive topics, which Tong (2009: p.595) also calls ‘propaganda minefields’, are understood by online news workers through daily journalistic practices. But what content can be considered as *propaganda minefields* for online news? And what do online news workers mean when they refer a news topic as *sensitive*? This is a crucial question for this research, which has been raised many times in the text. For instance, P05 interpreted this as “anti-nation or anti-Party content” and called it *malicious content*. Both cyber police officers and Chinese online news workers attempted to summarise the different kinds of news content that they feel may be considered as crossing-the-line or sensitive, such as anti-socialist, or over critical to the authorities and its ideological basis. However, few of these forbidden topics were found to be systematically regulated. The *seven forbidden topics* (Chapter 5: 4.2) was an exception that was disclosed by personal bloggers but not by mainstream media. The value of this disclosure is therefore undermined, as the existence of these forbidden rules were only endorsed by individuals. Yet the list of seven forbidden topics is also not the guide for Chinese online news workers

to reference when they are producing online news. These online news workers, however, experience a wider range of forbidden topics and are accustomed to work under the obstruction of the authorities and their superiors. Judgement about whether certain news content is *harmonious* is based on the individual experience of these online news workers, and determining whether a news story is harmonious is highly dependent on this individual judgement. Harmonisation or the harmony of society is, without doubt, a significant concept and key to the political agenda for the Chinese government and the Party (Chen, 2014; Winfield & Peng, 2005). However, the notion of synchronising with the tone of officials can be a problematic term in news production, because the notion is relatively ambiguous in terms of inclusion and exclusion of news material. What could be considered as an absolute news taboo? There is no standard answer to this question. Online news workers have to understand the raw material and approach stories carefully, and the skills involved in avoiding the minefield and bypassing the censorship of the authorities are acquired from their daily journalistic practices.

The findings from the in-depth interviews also contributed to identify how Chinese online journalists and editors conceive the processes of online news production. In the process of analysing transcripts, this thesis demonstrates that the notion of self-censorship had to be clarified, in order to proceed with the analysis of censorship and editorial control within the newsroom. Interviewees were found to have different understandings of what 'self' meant, and what 'self-censorship' included and excluded. Like the confusions that they might make for distinguishing the Party and the government, interviewees' different understandings of the notion of self-censorship required further explication.

To articulate this notion and clarify its scope, a model of self-censorship was established and developed step-by-step. It was realised during the interviews that online journalists

and editors talked about different notions of self-censorship. It inspired the identification of three stages of censorship in the online newsroom, which are individual conception, editorial control and administrative (See graphic details in figure 13, *Chapter 6: 3.1*).

In short, the stage of ‘self-censorship of individual conception’ refers to the self-reflection and action during the online journalists’ self-digestion of the pressure of censorship regulation, editing the wording and the depth of their report before submitting to editors. This process of self-censorship appears to be similar to what happens in newsrooms in the West, such as the internalisation of control (Jansen, 1991), but at its core the understanding of news values for Chinese online news workers is significantly different. Online journalists were understood as chained to the regulations in producing online news content. On this stage, the sensibility, knowledge and experience that online journalists had would determine the approval chance for their news stories. During this stage, online journalists were self-disciplined about the importance of keeping their news stories “politically correct”. It was assessed that this pressure had influenced the news values, as participants emphasised their awareness of synchronising the official tone (Chen, 2014; Hu, 2007), and discussed what they understood as ‘minefield’ topics in news reporting which they did not intend to approach.

Both editorial and administrative censorship also happened within the online newsroom, though it may be arguable if administrative involvement, where no online journalists and editors participated, could be seen as online newsroom activity. However, the Party infiltration heavily influenced the processes of news production, and the final online news content was produced as the work of all online journalists, editors and web administrators. Furthermore, both observation and interview results indicated that these three stages of censoring were not isolated. Online journalists, editors and web administrators were

interactive in one way or another, though the web administrators could be more dictatorial sometimes. Especially in the stage of editorial control, many editors and online journalists embraced an open and collaborative working environment, because it enabled them to share the responsibilities and produce news stories with collective ideas.

This thesis has examined how online news workers are required, both administratively and institutionally, to maintain a hassle-free environment on the webpages of online news. This is not a part of the journalistic role of storytelling (Singer, 1997: p.97), or quality control (Canter, 2014: p.112), but rather a compromise made in response to the pressure of censorship. And for that reason, I see pseudo commentators and user-generated content monitors as reflections of the pressure of censorship within the online newsrooms.

Supervision in online news is not considered journalistic practice, as supervisors of online news are not actually involved in the process of news production. The setting of supervision is part of the online censorship protocol that allows the Party to infiltrate and have representatives within the news organisations. It can be seen as an inherited form of news construction which Zhao (1998) calls the Party principle, which enforces the news media to accept the Communist Party's guiding ideology and leadership and stick to the Party's organisational principle and press policies (Zhao, 1998: p.19). This also shows that Chinese journalists are part of China's institutional ideological apparatus (McNair, 2009: p.240), and in times of media transformation their roles demand that they both serve the state authorities (Lee, 2005) and balance the influence of commercialisation and political control (Lo, Chan & Pan, 2005: p.156).

## 8.4. How does censorship impact on journalistic practice?

This thesis highlights the specific ways in which the protocol of censorship impacts on journalistic practice. The most significant Party control over online news media was its infiltration into the hierarchical structure, and its impact on journalistic work in a way which caused the processes of online news production to be interfered with and obstructed by the Chinese authorities. As mentioned in *Chapter 6: 4.3*, the supervision team, which consisted of Party members, ranked as senior employees of the online news, and they oversaw the online journalists and editors. The supervisors, therefore, were likely to be ideological guides or political gatekeepers rather than actual online news workers. Although their work had little relevance to the journalistic practice in the newsroom, they were seen as symbols of the Party's control. For the purpose of sustaining the Party's interests, news values can be undermined or compromised. And in order to deliver the image of a harmonious society, social conflicts may need to be concealed (Tong, 2009: p.607). This can be considered a crucially negative aspect of maintaining the harmonious image in news.

This infiltration was strong and stable in every sense. For online news workers, the Party's supervision was rooted deeply in their routine. Due to the gatekeeping of supervisors, the self-censorship of individual conception (see details in chapter 6: 3.1) of online news workers sometimes reflected the readership of the censors more than of the public audience. The stability of the Party's infiltration reinforced the strength of the media machinery of the state, as the latter controlled the whole online news media industry in China. In the introduction in *Chapter 3:2*, it was learnt that the GFW and the network system were controlled by the authorities. This study which was based on the networks

controlled by the Party, discussed the strength of this media control, and its impact on the online journalistic practice.

Some researchers have argued that commercialisation has already made Chinese online news a freer place with less institutional interference (Qiu, 2000; Fries, 2000; Van De Donk, *et al.* 2004). This thesis has demonstrated, however, that it is still a huge challenge for online news workers to resist the political demands of authorities. China's media transformation is shaping the way Chinese journalists judge what is newsworthy. Pan and Chan (2003: p.653) have argued that Chinese journalists have an enhanced awareness of professionalism, such as commitment to objectivity and truth. However, the findings of this thesis have highlighted the Party's infiltration and demonstrated that this judgment might be overly optimistic. The failed online protest of the SW (see details in *Chapter 6: 3.3*) was a reminder of the dominant status that the authorities had. Although the SW had inspired a large audience online and stirred a nationwide debate about free speech and a free press, it was extinguished shortly afterwards by the backlash from other state-owned media and the top-down instructions to replace staff.

The significance of incidences such as Bo Xilai's downfall and the Wenzhou train collision, which were too valuable to be overlooked for this study, reflected distinctive characteristics of how Internet censorship impacts on journalistic work, for example a stricter censoring standard for critical news that involved a larger-scale of the public sector and higher degree of public attention (Wu, 2012), the authorities' practice of converting crisis into public relation campaigns, and the well-oiled machinery that infiltrated the organs of online news media.



In conceptual terms, despite its claim of limited freedom, Confucianism also contributes to journalistic professionalism in a way that leads public intellectuals and elites to have a sense of social conscience (Tong & Spark, 2009 & 2011). The self-conception of Chinese journalists places them into the category of *public intellectuals and elites* who are encouraged to be less dependent on political power (Tong & Spark, 2009: p.340) and to resist administrative interference. In this sense, Chinese online news workers who attempted and sometimes succeeded in serving the public with the truth can be considered professional journalists. Singer (2003: pp.156-7) has argued that such a commitment to truth is a core professional norm for news workers.

As pioneers who struggle with censorship and strive to avoid administrative interference in the online news industry, southern media were highly praised by online news workers and enjoyed an optimistic reputation because of their pursuit of free speech and free press. Besides the geographical advantage, which gave them a lift in resisting censorship, Guangdong's revolution history and strong economic status also heavily influenced the aggressiveness and liberal spirit of the southern media. The southern media arguably inherited the distinctive revolutionary character, and the region's economic strength sustained its influence of the public in China's political landscape, as these historical and economic reasons had assisted the media in the territory to reduce the influence of centralised media control from the authorities.

This thesis has examined how news production passes through a continual process of censorship starting with uncensored news and raw news material at one end and censored news content at the other. This process involves individual online news workers, editorial control, gatekeeping and supervision. However, there is still room for news media to

argue and negotiate over the final news content, due to the unsystematic implementation of censorship (Lam, 2000: p.42) and the ambiguous notion of what it means to be harmonious. For Chinese online news workers the process of judging newsworthiness is particularly distinctive. It strongly demonstrates what is required of them as communist journalists, that is, to serve the political demands of the authoritarian state and to be the mouthpiece of the propaganda machine. However, experienced online news workers knew how to take advantage of grey areas, and produce news stories that normally would not be approved by the censors. Experienced online news workers were proud of their strategies and even some journalistic tricks to bypass censorship. Although Singer (2003: p.156) argues that sometimes the society tends to view journalism with less than admiration, many attributes of journalists still makes themselves to be professional. In defence of those Chinese online news workers who “battle” (Tong, 2007: p.534) the censorship pressure against the authorities, their strategies and journalistic tactics have to be highlighted. These tactics self-estimated as valuable assets for the journalists and editors, in order to report news stories that were likely to be interfered with, censored, or erased. One of the significant examples of bypassing censorship and administrative interference was WN’s report on an illegal strip club (see detail in *Chapter 6: 4.4*). Journalists and editors described this act as ‘dancing in chains’. Although the processes of ‘dancing in chains’ might put the online news workers in a position of struggling and wrestling with the censors, many would still choose to honour the professionalism that they were convinced was, in their terms, ‘to pursue the truth for the public’ (P02). These journalistic tricks may not scratch the surface of obstruction of free speech and free press in the whole picture, nor do they contribute to higher causes such as political reformation and media liberation in China, but they reflect the resistance of online news workers.

Significantly, this thesis has demonstrated that fear among censors can also be seen as a reflection of marketisation and the increased autonomy of online news workers. The government officials are dealing with media supervision that might have seemed *harmless* to them before this media transformation. It is worth noting that the process of gaining this autonomy was evolutionary. Previous literature has indicated that for a few decades after the establishment of PRC, Chinese news workers enjoyed limited freedom of choice in reporting news. The Cultural Revolution also demolished individuality and a free press environment (Gold, 1985; Robson, 1995). The media served the sole purpose of spreading propaganda to the benefit of the state, until the early 1980s. The news media, by that time, were perceived as a mouthpiece of the state or of a single leader, namely, Mao Zedong. I argue that such a conceptual framing of the parameters of speech and expression play an important role in understanding the specific ideological motivations and structural operationalisation of the protocols of censorship in China.

This research, however, does not intend to discuss or speculate about the approaches China's next generation of leaders may adopt to free press and censorship. Its primary focus is on the current situation. The keynote of stabilisation and harmonisation is hardly a good sign for liberals, because every proposal for political reformation, liberalising the media or reducing administrative intervention may be suppressed in the name of instability or disharmony. The southern media and its factions might have stirred debates on the subject of liberalism, reintroduced valuable ideas regionally about free press and free speech, and contributed to enlightenment to some extent, but these positive developments have not succeeded in overturning the censorship mechanism in the whole country.

## **8.5. Final remarks**

Setting out the mechanisms of Internet censorship of online news media in China, this research discussed the protocols of censorship that are applied by the cyber police to online news, and a coordinating but restraining relationship between the Chinese authorities and online news media regarding their influence over the output of online content. The censor roles of the cyber police are discussed, along with analysis of how the mechanisms of censorship are optionalised and how they impact on the processes of online news production. Picking up these findings of the thesis, this section makes final remarks about the research, including the limits of the findings and further developments that could be made in the study of censorship of online news media in China.

### **8.5.1 Limitations**

From the perspective of methods and data gathering, this research has the same limitation that all other observation-based and interview-based researches have. Firstly, the non-participating observation was not absolute. The ideal setting of conducting a non-participant observation for a researcher is to be completely blind in the environment and be invisible. However, the ideal setting is impractical when the online journalists and editors were watched and recorded by an outsider sitting in the newsroom. It was perceived that certain behaviours of these online news workers were influenced, as interaction between the participants and the observer was unavoidable.

To overcome this problem, several attempts were made to minimise the unnecessary interference during the process of observation: 1) A prep observation was conducted before the formal four-week observation, in order to build rapport beforehand. 2) Electronic recording devices were abandoned. Instead, pens and notebooks were used due

to their better quality for blending in. 3) Even during the pilot study, observers attempted to avoid interaction with other participants when recording. It allowed the online news workers to become familiar with the existence of an extra person in the newsroom.

Interview has the disadvantage of being subjective and unsystematic (Kvale, 1996). To overcome this, I used cross validation and fact-check for minimising the disadvantages. For instance, in *Chapter 6:1.2*, in order to testify to the censorship of image that the online journalists and editors argued, edited news photos were found. Interviews are also criticised as unreliable, biased, and individualistic (Kvale, 1996, p.284- 291). Kvale (1996) and Wengraf (2001) argued that some of these weaknesses are unavoidable. The solution for this weakness in this study is the use of multiple sources of evidence. Inspired by Yin's (2009) theory of triangulation, this research collected other second-hand data to verify, testify, and examine the individual perspectives from the interviews. Furthermore, the combined method of observation and interview also helped this research to triangulate, in order to increase the reliability of the findings (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000, pp.336-350).

A regretful limitation is that the number of cyber police officer interviewees may be considered as insufficient. Giving the difficulties of approaching cyber police officers who were willing to take part in interviews, only two participants were accessed. Although the quality of analysis does not merely depend on the quantity of interviewees, this small amount of interviewees may leave the findings of this research vulnerable.

Some findings about the cyber police may be difficult to revisit for further development, as I understand that the accessibility of cyber police officers cannot always be guaranteed. The difficulty of accessing cyber police participants for raw data was one of the most

challenging tasks throughout the whole process of data collecting. Before going to the field, unverified rumours were heard that approaching and contacting cyber police officers in China might be against certain rules or regulations, and attempters might be warned, even if it was for a research purpose. And I learnt that others who attempted interviewing cyber police officers were warned after the data collecting process of this research. Although I have no doubt that the credit for the successful contact belongs to a well-established strategy of snow-ball rolling participant recruiting, it is still worth noting that the experiment of accessing cyber police participants may require further efforts for reproduction.

### **8.5.2 Future development**

There is a possibility that the findings regarding the online newsroom may be attacked because of the representativeness of the newsroom itself. As noted, Wenzhou News is localised, and interviewees also indicated that the setting, structure and routines might vary in different online newsrooms. To overcome this, another two online newsrooms were visited during the interview period. The online newsrooms of Qiangjiang News and Wuhai Online were used as comparisons for the observation. Although these two newsrooms were not observed at the same length and depth, the comparisons showed significant differences in the economic influence on the free press environment of the online newsrooms (See details in *Chapter 6: 3.1*)

Like any other doctoral research, this research has its potentiality to be developed along different paths. An economic perspective can bring a new angle to this study. Although in a previous chapter, I have limited the scope of discussion to political censorship only, and eliminated other topics such as economic or pornographic unless they are political-related, this research still has its potentiality to be expanded with an economic perspective.

In the fieldwork period, attention was paid to the impact of online news media marketisation, as news workers asserted that the protocol of online news producing was heavily shaped by the force of the market, and the online news content was observed as market-oriented. This data was reflected in the chapter on online news media.

Online news workers who worked in a modern and marketised newsroom enjoyed a freer and more liberal atmosphere than those who worked in less marketised ones. The comparison of Qiangjiang's, WN, and Wuhai's online newsrooms proved this. The economic development status of these online newsrooms' location also influenced their process of marketisation: Both Qiangjiang and WN were in an economically-developed area in the east coast, whereas Wuhai was rooted deeply in the inland and economically undeveloped. This study has made an attempt to prove that the decisiveness of the economy can influence the environment of free speech and free press. Due to the lack of a wide-ranging observation on online newsrooms in China, it did not succeed. But the prospect of examining this influence of marketisation or economy is still promising.

The study on cyber police also has potentiality to be expanded with more depth and breadth if more data can be acquired. Doing fieldwork with cyber police officers is a new angle of studying online censorship in China, as it explores the perspectives of censors. As stated earlier in this and a previous chapters, the difficult accessibilities obstructed and stalled the process of data gathering, thereby limiting the depth of data analysis.

Censorship of user-generated content can be another promising aspect to explore in the future. Although some of the interviewees answered questions about online censorship of user-generated content, I did not go into details in the analysis stage. The focus of this

study is on the censorship of online news media, therefore, I intentionally reduced but did not neglect the focus on the censorship of user-generated content.



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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview invitation letter

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*(Participant's address)*

*(Dates)*

Dear *Participant (specified name)*:

Thanks for offering me this opportunity to invite you to be part of my research. Please allow me to explain what this research is about before you make the decision whether to take part. I'm a PhD student studying at the Department of Journalism Studies, University of Sheffield. My research interests are free speech on the Internet and the censorship over it. This project aims to critically provide a coherent description for **the environment of freedom of speech on the Internet in China**.

I'm sincerely inviting you to the interview, which will be conducted as one of the crucial processes for my research. This interview is being conducted for the purpose of answering my research questions on the environment of free speech and

censorship on the Internet in China; the focus is on a selected case, (*note: specified case name and a one or two sentence brief explanation of the case itself*). It will take no more than two hours. Anything you and I communicate would be recorded using appropriate means, such as audio recording, and would be used and only be used for the purpose of this project. Details clarifying data protection is written and presented to you in a separate sheet. Please find them in attachment. (See Appendix B)

This information sheet claims several premises for conducting the interview using the data, listed below. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign the form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

I will appreciate if you decide to accept my invitation. Your perspective will be significantly meaningful. We will be keeping in touch for further details if you find this interesting.

Kindly regards,  
Yiran Zhao

*Supervised by Dr. John Steel (The University of Sheffield)*



## **Appendix B: Participant information and consent sheet for the study of censorship of online news media.**

Party A: Interviewer

Name: Yiran Zhao

Position: PhD student of Journalism Department, The University of Sheffield

Address (UK): A8A IQ Brocco, 34 Edward Street, Sheffield, S3 7GB, UK

E-mail: jop10yz@shef.ac.uk

Party B: Interviewee

### **Introduction**

Party B is being invited to take part in a research study. Before Party B decides whether or not to take part, it is important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

This interview, hereby, is conducted for the purpose of Party A's study of the environment of free speech on the Internet in China. The data of this interview will be used in this project, and may be used for future research. This project aims to critically provide a coherent description for the environment of freedom of speech on the Internet in China.

This information sheet claims several premises for conducting the interview and using the data, listed below. It is up to Party B to decide whether or not to take part. If Party B does decide to take part, he/she will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign the form. If Party B decides to take part, he/she are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

### **Information**

This information consent form must be signed by both parties before the interview is conducted. Two separate copies are made. Each party keeps one of them.

The articles are as follows:

- 1) Party B can partly or entirely reject to answer Party A's question in the interview.
- 2) Party B remains anonymous at all times during and after the interview in this project. And it is Party A's responsibility for consequences caused by the leak of Party's name.
- 3) It is also Party A's responsibility to protect Party B's identity during the process of data collecting, storing, analysing and publishing.
- 4) This interview will be recorded electronically.
- 5) The data of this interview will be used in this project, and may be used for future research.
- 6) This interview does not involve any situation as follows: participation of under-aged person; participant has committed criminal activity and he/she is serving a sentence; participant feels harmed physically or mentally; against local laws and regulations.
- 7) It is up to Party B to decide whether or not to take part. If Party B does decide to take part, he/she will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign the form. If Party B decides to take part, he/she are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

### **Consent**

Interviewer's name: Yiran Zhao  
Position: PhD student of Journalism Department, The University of Sheffield  
Address (UK): A8A IQ Brocco, 34 Edward Street, Sheffield, S3 7GB, UK  
E-mail: jop10yz@shef.ac.uk  
Contact Number: 0044 788353 7049

Party B: Interviewee

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

- 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.
- 3. I agree to take part in the above study.
- 4. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded
- 5. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being video recorded
- 6. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications
- 7. I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised) in a specialist data centre and may be used for future research.

Name of Party A Date Signature

Name of Party B Date Signature

## Appendix C: Interview guide

**No. of interview:** P01

**Occupation:** Journalist

**Organisation:** Wenzhou Evening Paper

**Education:** Holds a Bachelor degree in media studies

**Age:** 24

**Reason to be interviewed:** Had experience in reporting the Wenzhou train collision;  
has accessibility to interviews and press conferences which related to the incident;  
has experience in self-censorship in printing and web media.

### Interview guide

#### Introduction

I'm a PhD student studying in the Department of Journalism Studies, University of Sheffield. My research interests are free speech on the Internet and the censorship over it. This interview is being conducted for the purpose of answering my research questions on a selected case, media reflection on the Wenzhou train collision. It will take no more than two hours. Anything you and I communicate will be recorded by an appropriate means, such as audio recording, and will be used for the purpose of this project. Details of data protection clarification are written and presented to you in a separate copy. Do you wish to sign it? Before we start, do you have any question at this stage?

#### Background information

Occupation: Journalist

Organisation: Wenzhou Evening Paper

Education: Holds a Bachelor degree in media studies

Age: 24

#### Opening questions

1. What is your role in the Wenzhou Evening Paper?

Probe: nature of work, journalistic experience

2. What do you do during a working day?

Probe: interviewing skills, contact of interviewees

3. How do you build up your relationship with your sources?

Probe: sources, journalistic network, journalistic approaches working in Chinese media

4. How do you compose a news story?

Probe: journalistic approaches

### **Questions about reporting the incident**

5. What was your role in reporting the train collision?

Probe: the rescue scene, media coverage

6. How did you compose this news story?

Probe: Journalistic approaches, differences from normal procedure

7. What happened when the rescue team was trying to bury the cars of the trains?

Probe: rescue, chaos at the scene, suspect from the public

8. What was your role in reporting the press conference held by Minister Wen?

Probe: media coverage, conference content, government attitude

9. What was your role in reporting the press conference held by the Ministry of Railways?

Probe: media coverage, conference content, limit of accessibility

### **Questions about the censorship of the incident**

10. Have you been told not to report some news?

Probe: level of accessibility, authorisation of reporting

11. After the crash, the Ministry of Railways immediately held a press conference.

As far as I searched and researched, the whole version of this conference can only be found on the Internet. Why can we not have it on TV?

Probe: Differences between censorship on the Internet and Newspaper

12. In reporting this incident, how did you approach your contacts?

Probe: autonomy, authorisation of reporting

13. How do you rate your freedom of accessibility in reporting this incident?

Probe: fair, highly unsatisfied, authorisation

14. Before this interview, I collected questions from random civilians in my blog,

“what would you ask if you could interview a journalist who participated in reporting the train collision?” I had this: “I have nothing to ask, I felt numb.”

What do you think about this comment?

Probe: Public awareness of free speech/press

15. Facing a serious accusation of forcing the press to produce false reports and the list of missing people, which might have provided crucial evidence to respond to withholding the accusation, why did the government still refuse to reveal the list?  
Probe: Media control, censorship

16. What impressed you the most in reporting this incident?

**Closing questions**

17. What do you think of the term of “uncrowned king” for journalists? Do you agree that Chinese journalists are uncrowned kings?  
Probe: role of journalist, censorship and filtration

18. What do you think about the list of banned foreign portals? (List enclosed)  
Probe: banning policy, Golden Firewall, content control

19. What are your hopes for journalism in China in future?  
Probe: censorship, freedom of speech

## Appendix D: Table of details of interviewees

<i>Code</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education background</i>	<i>Administrative status</i>	<i>Unit</i>
<i>P00</i>	F	24	Bachelor of Media Studies	Journalist	Wenzhou Evening Paper
<i>P01</i>	M	33	Bachelor of Publishing and Editing	Journalist	Wenzhou News
<i>P02</i>	F	30	Bachelor of Economics and Finance	Editor	Wenzhou News
<i>P03</i>	M	54	Diploma of Chinese Literature	Web administrator, editor	Qianjiang Evening Paper
<i>P04</i>	M	33	Diploma of Publishing and Editing	Editor	Wuhai Online
<i>P05</i>	M	51	MBA	Cyber police officer	Director of Department of NIS, Bureau of Public Security
<i>P06</i>	M	39	Bachelor of Politics	Web administrator,	Qianjiang Evening Paper
<i>P07</i>	M	36	Bachelor of Security and Law Enforcement	Cyber police officer	Cyber policeman of Bureau of Public Security

## Appendix E: Viewpoints of interviewees

### P00 (Journalist, Wenzhou Evening Paper)

- Defines what content can be considered as having crossed the line: anti-Communist Party, anti-nation, and obscene language and images.
- For highly politically sensitive topics, such as Wenzhou trains collision, was instructed to “report less investigations” and avoid releasing pictures and news about causalities which may arouse public criticisms of the rescue process.
- Our position in reporting this (collision), as we were instructed, was clearly and obviously advocating that Wenzhou was a city of great love.
- Chose to be a journalist because was convinced that it was a profession that would allow him to pursue a higher cause. Pursuing the truth for the public.
- A general protocol for news worker who covers the political news is to correspond with the news spokesman, or government correspondent (Tong Xun Yuan in Mandarin), in order to gain access to an official source.
- Government correspondents are a group of government employees without whom the journalists would lose precious access to the official source. For this reason, journalists have to build cooperative relationships with government correspondents, even form a friendship with them.
- Government correspondents are also very first people for journalists to turn to when incident news stories are relevant to the government or particular officials. For breaking news, the protocol for journalists is to pick up the phone and make calls to correspondents, and make sure to get the official standpoints. This helps the news production on the track as the official standpoints directly influence the phrasing, angles, and even prohibitions of the news stories.
- Tong Gao is a compromised but also non-optional choice for incidents like Wenzhou trains collision. The public audience must be more interested in investigative report. But if the direct of the news is instructed to publish Tong Gao only, his journalists and editors should not go for investigative report at all.
- The stereotype of Chinese journalist for some foreign, Hong Kong and Taiwan journalists is freedom-less and obedient. The hands of Chinese journalists are tied.



He admits that it is hard to deny this stereotype because the Tong Gao indeed limited the scope and depth of reporting.

- The sensitivity of news topic can change. Some insensitive news topic may become sensitive in certain circumstances. For instance, the trains collided in a stormy and lightning-filled night. The journalists were instructed to not do weather reports and the correspondents from the weather bureau refused to give information about the lightning, as a speculation went over the web that it was the lightning that destroyed the orientation system of the trains. The lightning was blamed to be the direct cause of the collision, though this speculation was never proven. These kinds of changes in sensitivity may seem irrational, but the changes were necessary cautious procedures by the government for the harmonisation of the Internet.
- Some interviewees do not trust journalists. Interviewees refuse to talk to journalists as they were convinced that their underprivileged voice would not be heard. Being interviewed and recorded by the journalists may put them at risk without remuneration.
- Being politically correct sometimes is contradictory to journalistic professionalism. It is impractical to always satisfy one's conscience and political correctness.
- It is a shame for the authorities to attempt to conceal news facts. On the other hand, Chinese journalists are those who always pursue the facts that may never be reached, like the mythological figure Kua Fu who always pursues the sun but is never able to reach it.
- Glad to see that the online news has had impact on the censorship and administrative authoritarianism. Internet may be an icebreaker for the blocking of authoritarian news. Weibo, for instance, provides a significant form of civil supervision for the oversight of corruption and governmental power abuse.

### **P01 (Journalist, Wenzhou News)**

- The setting of Wenzhou News' online newsroom was hardly changed since it was founded, news workers who work in this surrounding are adaptable, despite the inconvenience in communication which the physical barriers created.
- Censorship of image is dramatic and regrettable, as some news pictures were excluded from the final version because they were disapproved by the web administrators. These pictures were, according to the administrators, either too

critical, or possibly would touch a nerve in the tension of the government and have the potential to assist in creating an image of a failing government.

- Journalists were instructed to downplay the scandals and corruptions of officials, unless they were instructed to do otherwise. But whether they are reported on, cannot be curtailed. It depends on what social impact the authorities are inclined to have.
- Believes that censorship pressure that the online news workers experience is as rigorous as for those who worked in offline news.
- To resist the censorship instructions, he believes there must be some necessity to use journalistic wisdom in the process of news production. He calls it “winning a battle” as he refers to the censors from the government side can be considered as enemies to the free press.
- Pursuing the truth for the public was an initial drive to become a journalist.

### **P02 (Editor, Wenzhou News)**

- The young journalists who left their schools and entered news industry appeared to lack imagination and creativity. Worried that this is caused by the failure of education, which the Chinese journalism schools and universities have to take account of.
- Some young and seemingly talented journalists do not have the intention to resist the instructions of censorship. Rather, they seem adaptable to censorship.
- On internal competition: the different sections in the news group have to raise their own funds or seek their own income from commercials, in order to maintain the website.
- Encourages the journalists to be involved in the process of editorial censorship. Proactivity is welcomed whereas a submissive attitude is discouraged. He calls this part of journalistic professionalism.
- Pursuing freedom of speech and a free press is a just and ethical virtue.
- In highly politically sensitive topics, online news workers receive directives that some stories have to be prohibited and some voices have to be silenced.
- A good relationship between the directors of the online news and the publicity officials can benefit the news production. On the other hand, the government is also an important source for the news, with whom the online news needs to build-up a good relationship.

- Speaks highly of southern media's news workers for the spirit of resistance and bravery.
- Admits that SW excelled because of their geographical advantage. The locale of SW is distant from the capital and beyond the reach of the full intervention force of the central government.
- Being institutional alike, online and offline news are constructed in a similar way where the Party was influentially infiltrated. Otherwise, the website would not be licensed by the government and unable to run the business. There is no chance, therefore, for online news being constructed without the influence of the Party.
- To pursue the truth for the public was once a young and enthusiastic dream, but it soon fell apart as he found the reality was not what he expected.

### **P03 (Web administrator, Qiangjiang Evening Paper)**

- There was a trend of transformation from the mode of 'planned-economic-like' to a more market-oriented one. The interest of the public audience is paid more attention by the online news workers.
- To think before to write. The process of journalistic self-conceiving is a process where journalists self-digest the censorship instructions, and balance the news value and safety of the stories. In this process, a good journalist knows how to conceive a story which lowers the risk of attracting trouble for the news group and him/her-self, while at the same time being publishable.
- The publicity department sometimes only gives blur instructions or implications. News workers have to, in this sense, self-estimate the boundaries of sensitive topics and filter the online content accordingly.
- Believes that the education and training for journalists have to take account for producing irresponsible young journalists who are easily compromised with censorship instructions. He defines the professionalism of journalists as "honest, determined and tactical", characteristics which are rarely seen nowadays in young journalists. He further worries that without the flesh and blood the traditional journalistic professionalism would be lost in China.
- In the process of editorial censorship, an over-active or over-resistant journalist is not welcomed, because they may slow down the workflow of news production. In addition, the boundaries of what phrase or expression is politically intolerable for the government is a matter of discourse, but a lower-ranked journalist who attempts to

overstep the seniority in the office is a matter of work ethics, which is already intolerable for editors.

- For highly politically sensitive topics, such as Bo Xilai's downfall which involved high-end political struggles in the central government, the directives from the authorities arrive in a top-down form which online news workers have to obey and have little room to negotiate.
- The rapid growth of online news is an information boost, which may trouble the authorities in online censorship matters, because neither the cyber police nor the publicity department have sufficient resources to censor online news content thoroughly.
- Online news may still benefit from a freer environment in terms of the insufficiency of manpower of the authorities. Based on the comparison made with the working environment of the newspapers, online news workers have more flexibility in determining the inclusion and exclusion of the news content.

#### **P04 (Editor, Wuhai Online)**

- "We know who the boss is" suggests that the government is dominant. The online news has to use strict filtering and censoring policies to comply with the government for its own good.
- In the process of editorial censorship, preferably, the pressure of censorship can be shared by journalists and editors amongst themselves in order to provide an insightful story which is at the same time suitable to publish or broadcast.
- Journalistic conceiving and "to think before to write" is a necessary journalistic skill without which the process of news production would be delayed.
- Praises the southern media as admirable.
- The boundaries of journalists and editors sometimes can be blurred, as some journalists may also be required to take on the responsibilities of editing in the news production process. These journalists are credited for their awareness of journalistic conception of self-censorship.

#### **P05 (Director of NIS, Zhejiang)**

- Supervises and executes in a non-technical working environment.

- Being extremely discreet. Distance himself from advanced electronic devices, as these devices would leave trails of online activities, which potentially leads to disclosure of personal identity to the public.
- The disclosure of personal identity and exposure of privacy are seen as threats to a political career.
- Firmly refused to be recorded by recorders in the interview, despite the promise of anonymity.
- The briefing and reporting protocol in the NIS is separated from the other department of the public security because it is necessary, as the cyber police department is an independent section that receives direct instructions from the directors of the bureau, this indicates the important status of the cyber police in the public security system.
- Fighting against the Internet crime, the cyber police have to monitor the Internet activities closely and discreetly for the benefit of what he calls the wellness of environment of the Internet.
- Malicious content includes those anti-Communist Party, anti-nation, hate speech and sarcasm directed at the government.
- One of the responsibilities of the cyber police, or the aim of protecting the wellness environment of the Internet, is to preserve regional stability and bolster civilian morale.
- For highly politically sensitive topics, such as Bo Xilai's downfall, the cyber police has to work closely with the online news and the publicity department in order to serve the purpose of maintaining wellness of the Internet, because the information boost for incidents like this can cause serious trouble for sensors: massive information boosts on the news websites, and malicious content may be mixed amongst them.
- As to answering and defining what acts on the Internet can endanger the national security, he outlines advocating the corrupt thoughts from the west, attempting to spread a cult, and some agitation for mass incidents. The hostile mind-set has to be always alerted.
- Restating the authority of the administrative disciplines is to disallow online news to appeal, as the decisions made by the government are final.
- Distancing from the Internet social network base for the same reason as distancing from the advanced electronic devices.

- The disciplines for websites vary accordingly. The total hits count and the influence of the websites need to be considered. Also, the websites which contain users' complaints and criticisms of the government may not be disciplined as it is a tactical way for underprivileged social group to vent their resentment.

### **P06 (Web administrator, Qianjiang Evening Paper)**

- Cross the line: radical speech criticising particular officials, personal attacks, speculation and rumours, and advertising links could be considered as crossing the line and intolerable for the website.
- Admits that the southern media excelled because of its geographical advantage.
- The minefield of news reporting of the almost-prohibited topics which most journalists would attempt to report. And if a journalist attempts to do so, he/she has to be extremely careful of wording, phrasing and angle of the report, in order to avoid the risk of being censored.
- Journalistic conception of self-censorship is a process for journalists to evaluate and balance the outcome and risk of reporting certain critical news.
- What the southern media news worker did against the administrative interference, is an encouragement for all Chinese news workers.

### **P07 (Cyber police officer, Jinhua)**

- Addresses that an important work routine for a cyber police officer is to serve and to obey. The daily work includes attending meetings and briefings for administrative instructions, and preventing and fighting against Internet crimes.
- Admits that the cyber police do not require high-end Internet technique. Only basic Internet skills are required. This requirement determines that the scope of recruitment for cyber police is not limited to technical police trainees, but all kinds of police trainees.
- Cautious towards disclosure, and refused to be recorded by an electronic recorder in the interview because he believes if the recording leaks, his career would be threatened.
- Confirms the uniformity of cyber police with other kinds of police in the public security, as he believes this can help the cyber police blend in and hardly be noticed by the public.

- For security and safety reasons, cyber police are prohibited from working alone under any circumstance, in order to avoid bias and corruption.
- Verifies the *Seven Forbidden Topics* is a real instruction given by superiors.
- Manual operation can assist the firewall to filter and detect sensitive content across the Internet.
- Employing civil-reporting can also assist the filtering and detecting mission for the sensitive content on the Internet, as the cyber police do not have sufficient manpower to filter all alerted content.
- Inspections and patrols that mainly target the Internet cafe are an important work responsibility for the cyber police. The Internet cafe is seen as the most ‘troubled’ place full of lower-social-class people who spread rumours and defame the image of the authorities, sometimes just for entertainment.
- Worries that the average age of an Internet criminal is lowering. Some of the Internet hackers and rumour spreaders are almost kids who can only be educated but cannot be taken to the court. However, these kids who possess hacker technique can be destructive for the work of cyber police, as the skills for hacking and counter-surveillance nowadays are easy to learn on the Internet.
- Defends that the cyber police may violate users’ privacy at some point, but it is, in his defence, neither lawful nor unlawful, due to the fact that Internet legitimation lags behind the fast development of the Internet.
- The Great Firewall is a powerful project that can deny users access to the Internet. But common users who are denied may regain their accessibilities in a certain period of time. The blockage of user access is only a form of temporary and minor discipline and the record of it may not be used against users’ violation of Internet use regulation because it would be overwritten before being traced.
- The advanced electronic device, such as smart phones and personal computers, can be traced, monitored and located by the cyber police for purposes of counter-Internet-crimes.
- Although some civil hackers possess high-end technique which the cyber police do not have, the relationship between these civil hackers and the cyber police is hostile and not cooperative. The cyber police do not attempt to employ freelance hackers to advance their technique in Internet surveillance, because it is unnecessary at this stage.

## **Appendix F: Recruitment stages and criteria of the cyber police:**

- 1) A recruitment examination runs once a year by local police schools, normally starting from the end of May. The registration for the examination ends one month earlier.
- 2) All candidates go through an overall assessment. That means candidates who register for cyber police examination are tested in the same subjects as other candidates.
- 3) A candidate has to pass the written examination held by the police schools in the subject of literacy and fitness tests.
- 4) A candidate has to fulfil the following criteria:
  - a. Loving the country and the people, obeying the laws; having a strong sense of organisational disciplines and regulations; willing to participate in voluntary work for public security, and willing to obey the assignment after graduation.
  - b. Aged under 22 years-old.
  - c. Unmarried.
  - d. Having a degree from either high school, technical secondary school, or vocational school; having registered permanent residence in the province where the test takes place.
  - e. Physically healthy: in the North, the height of male candidates must not be less than 1.70 meters (including 1.70 meters), and female candidates must not be less than 1.60 meters (including 1.60 meters); in the South, the height of male candidates must not be less than 1.68 meters (including 1.68 meters), and female candidates must not be less than 1.58 meters (including 1.58 meters); the weight of male candidates must not



be less than 50 kg, female candidates must not be less than 45 kg; eyesight not less than 4.8 (including 4.8); strictly not any condition of achromatopsia, hypochromatopsia, weak-of-hearing, anarthria; no sign of obvious flaws on face, including harelip, heterotropia, cross-eye, torticollis, or scars; good sense of smell; no pigeon breast, bromhidrosis, severe varicosity, bowlegs, flatfoot, tattoos, hairy hair, humpback, or other kinds of disabilities; lineal relatives have no history of mental disorders.

f. Not infected by contagions, including various kinds of hepatopathy.

g. Reasonably athletic.

5) Interviews may be required.

6) Candidates who passed the written examination, fitness tests, and the interviews, need to go through the last stage of political background verification. In this stage, candidates' political backgrounds are reviewed, and a successful candidate must not: have a history of criminal activity, be a suspect, or bad moral behaviour; have lineal relatives or close collateral relatives who have a history of betraying the country, harming the national security, or committing political crimes that resulted in the death sentence.

## **Appendix G: Clarification of terms and phrases**

There are a number of terms and phrases used in this thesis which require explanation. Some phrases emerge specifically from China's political and cultural context. Phrases such as 'the spirit of briefing' and 'public opinion orientation', for example. Others are key to the analysis of censorship of online news, such as 'autonomy within the newsroom' and 'institutional autonomy', because they are considered as distinctive elements in understanding online news workers and online newsrooms in China.

### **“Autonomy within the newsroom and institutional autonomy”**

Autonomy in the newsroom refers to the individual news workers' autonomous power in the process of news production. It involves the power of disposition to revise, censor, amend and make further decisions in relation to news content. The most commonly seen professionals in the newsroom, journalists, editors and administrators, have limited autonomy. In the online newsrooms, such autonomy is dependant upon where the individual resides within the organisation. That is, the higher ranked news workers have more power and are more decisive than lower ranked news workers. For example, editors are more powerful in censoring and amending online news content than online journalists, as they are ranked higher than online journalists. The hierarchical structure of the online newsroom, therefore, is seen as an important aspect of analysing for this research, due to its determination of the power flow and protocol of online news censoring.

In the context of Chinese online news, unlike the autonomy in the newsroom which focuses on individual disposition, the institutional autonomy is used to describe the news media's organisational freedom in relation to the public. Although each of these terms

share the same phrase in Chinese (*Hua Yu Quan*), the institutional autonomy looks at the newsroom and all the news workers within the news media as a whole entity and refers to the public influence/social influence it possesses. This concept is significant for understanding some discussions and findings of this research. For instance, in the triangular models of online censorship that is examined in this study, the institutional autonomy of the online newsroom was asserted as an important restrictive force which restrains intervention of the authorities in the processes of online news production. It allowed the online news media in China the organisational freedom to negotiate the directives from the authorities over the subject of online news content.

### **“Spirit of briefing”**

‘The spirit of the briefing’ (or ‘the spirit of meeting’) is a bureaucratic phrase translated from the Mandarin term ‘Hui Yi Jing Shen’. The term spirit of briefing is seen as a general term that is frequently used by the authorities. The Chinese online news media use it to describe the content of agendas for many meetings and briefings which the authorities pass on to the news workers (Chen, D. 2014; Liu, 2014b).

In this study, ‘spirit of meeting’ refers to a form of mouth-to-mouth instructions or directives from the authorities to the online news. The phrase was firstly recorded in observation when I saw internal briefings in the online newsroom. The term ‘spirit’ was a vague concept that was used by the Deputy Director of *Wenzhou News* in the internal briefing to describe a general set of agendas that were delivered by the publicity department. I understand that the content of the agenda can vary, depending on the kind of instructions and directives that the publicity department intends to deliver. Here, in this study, the ‘spirit of the meeting’ indicates the publicity department’s intention to regulate

the online news and its news workers, by guiding public opinion and by creating the atmosphere of harmony in the online news.

### **“Public opinion orientation”**

In the online newsroom in China, one of the most commonly seen agendas from the spirit of meeting is when the online news workers are instructed to orientate public opinion. The term ‘public opinion orientation’ (or public opinion guiding/orientation, *Yu Lun Yin Dao* in Chinese) refers to a unique functionality of Chinese online news workers, that is, Chinese online news workers have responsibility of being pseudo commentators and user-generated content monitors. In short, they are responsible for monitoring the user-generated content in their website, deleting content seen as either being politically sensitive or obscene, and pretending to be a common user and posting content. By doing these activities, the online content would be harmonised, thereby public opinion would be orientated.