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ARTICLE

Online news meets established journalism: how China's journalists evaluate the credibility of news websites

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Abstract

The internet presents challenges to traditional journalism by being a platform for alternative practices of news production and dissemination. In response, traditional journalists are expected to engage in 'news repair' in order to reconfirm the authority of existing news institutions and the legitimacy of traditional models of journalism. This interaction between new media and journalistic practices must be contextualized within a media system. Built upon these premises, this study analyzes data from probability sample surveys of journalists in two Chinese cities. It finds that journalists regard mainstream media organizations' websites as more credible than those run by commercial portals. The perceived credibility of these two types of news websites varies with journalists' beliefs about journalism. While party journalism remains a dominant lens through which Chinese journalists evaluate the two

types of websites, the sites of commercial portals are viewed by some to be embodying an alternative model of journalism.

Key words

Chinese media • media credibility • models of journalism • news repair • online journalism

Introduction

Traditional print and broadcast media journalism has a complicated relationship with the internet. On the one hand, the internet is a very useful tool in news production (Callahan, 1999; Harper, 1998; Pavlik, 2001). With it, journalists can search for background information to contextualize stories, contact sources via emails and interact with readers in chatrooms. The internet also provides convenient access to a wider range of international news outlets, benefiting especially the newsrooms that do not have sufficient resources for foreign news coverage (Chan et al., 2003).

However, it also poses a challenge to mainstream journalism by facilitating alternative methods of news production and dissemination. It provides a platform for the rise of 'online news services', ranging from those offered by commercial portals to those operated by idiosyncratic 'online journalists'. More fundamentally, producing online news involves skills, judgements and routines different to those in traditional news work (Ianzito, 1996; Stein, 1999). Some observers thus argue that the shift from print to online newspapers involves changes not only in information infrastructure, structural relationships among journalists, sources and audiences, but also the very definition of news (Boczkowski, 2001).

In response, mainstream journalists, at least in the USA, hold a generally negative attitude toward the internet. They are concerned with source credibility, information reliability and difficulties in verifying facts in the online world (Garrison, 2000; Weise, 1997). Such reactions can be seen as constituting a process of 'news repair' that reaffirms the institutional authority of traditional news media and the legitimacy of the traditional model of journalism (Bennett et al., 1985; McCoy, 2001).

Traditional journalism's responses to online journalism would shape the further development of journalism in the new media environment. The present study is aimed at tackling this issue empirically by examining how traditional journalists react to the opportunities and challenges posed by the internet and the news practices it sustains. More specifically, it focuses on journalists' evaluations of the credibility of online news sites. Our main contention is that, when rendering credibility ratings of online news sites, journalists are evaluating not only the medium as a technology and a mode of presentation, but also the output coming from a particular model of

journalism. Such evaluations should reflect journalists' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, competing models of doing news work.

This study analyzes data from surveys of journalists in two cities in China, where the internet rose as a news medium at the historical juncture of 'media reforms'. The reforms provide a unique setting to show that journalists' perceptions of, and reactions to, online news involve more than how to do news work in a technical sense. Rather, they are intertwined with the maintenance of journalism as an institution situated in a specific media system. With this context, this study is aimed also at providing some empirical indications of how the internet medium is incorporated into China's news media mix during the reforms.

CREDIBILITY OF ONLINE JOURNALISM AS A PROBLEM OF NEWS REPAIR

Even though the practices of online journalism have yet to be congealed into a distinct mode of newsmaking (Stein, 1999), there are sufficient indications of its differences from the more familiar mode (Boczkowski, nd; Gordon, 2003). The potential for immediacy, cross-platform synergy, multimodal presentation and interactivity have motivated major changes not only in media ownership and organizational structures (McChesney, 1999), but also in the ways in which journalists operate in reporting and presenting news (Hammond et al., 2000). Clearly, the challenges are not limited to gaining technological proficiency. Rather, they are at the level of the very definition of news (Boczkowski, nd) and the model of journalism involved.

With traditional news production being a small but significant part of a larger conglomerate, journalists also encounter 'hidden conflicts' between their professional norms and organizational interests. Different practices emerge in quelling such conflicts and mending institutional tensions within an organization (Turow, 1994). As a part of a larger profit-seeking conglomerate (Champlin and Knoedler, 2002), online news operation may open up more layers of news production to market pressure (Cohen, 2002). In addition, the 'anything goes' (Stein, 1999) mode of generating content for websites has posed serious threats both to ways of doing journalism and operationally defining professional standards and ethics.

Specific technological possibilities also create problems for journalists who value the traditional newsmaking process. The 24-hour deadline and the public's expectation of 'non-stop breaking news', for example, have led to concerns that online news operators rush information to press rather than taking the time to channel it through a vigorous gatekeeping process (see Boczkowski, 2000; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999). In addition, the customization or personalization of news products has led to concerns with fragmentation of the mass audience (Katz, 1996). Further, the value of other technological possibilities, such as audiovisual presentations and interactivity,

is suspicious when viewed through the lens of traditional journalism. While such features are likely to increase the audience appeal of news products, it is uncertain whether their utilization would result necessarily in news with better quality.

It is against this background that the problem of 'news repair' arises (Bennett et al., 1985). Numerous studies have shown that when challenges are posed to existing journalistic paradigms and institutions, mainstream journalists respond either by dismissing the legitimacy of the challenges, or reconstituting them to repair the existing definitions of news and news institutions (Bennett et al., 1985; Reese, 1990). With regard to the challenge posed by online journalism, news repair can be discerned when journalists engage in an effort to undermine the validity of an online news story by linking the problems of the story to its being online (McCoy, 2001). At the same time, to the extent that journalists' evaluations of online news sites are filtered through the lens comprising their familiar model of news work, journalists holding negative attitudes toward internet news sites, especially in terms of their credibility (Garrison, 2000; Weise, 1997) is a manifestation of the broader phenomenon of news repair.

However, there have been few attempts to demonstrate empirically the linkage between journalists' evaluations of news sites' credibility and their professional self-understanding. Most past studies on journalists' attitudes toward the internet are descriptive (Garrison, 2000), while more explanatory studies of online news credibility focus mainly on citizens as the evaluators (e.g. Bucy, 2003; Flanagin and Metzger, 2000; Johnson and Kay, 1998, 2002; Schweiger, 2000). Therefore, this study fills a gap in the literature, which in turn can help us to understand the tension-filled relationship between traditional and online journalism.

JOURNALISM AND THE INTERNET IN CHINA

How journalists evaluate online news websites and to what extent online news would emerge as an alternative model of journalism depends upon various contextual factors. In China, given that the internet arrived on the scene together with the erosion of party journalism, online journalism might be viewed as a viable ideological alternative. This unique context provides us with an opportunity to see how systemic and institutional factors contextualize a new medium and its potential uses in journalism.

Media reforms in China have brought kaleidoscopic changes in the past 20 years. Although the retreat of the party-state from certain areas of media operations, coupled with market pressure, has enabled media organizations to acquire significant operational autonomy (Chan and Qiu, 2002), the basic tenets of the commandist media system (Lee, 1994) and party journalism remain (Pan, 2000a). When journalists 'improvise' experimental measures to move the reforms forward (Pan, 2000b), they are being lured also to pursue

their material gains in the market and lowering their ethical standards (Zhao, 1998). Journalism is being practised amid tensions among various forces, including continued party control (Chan, 1995), pressure for higher advertising revenues, incentives for personal material gains (Chen and Guo, 1998; He, 2000), professional ideals that often mix together with ideas from different ideational systems (Pan and Chan, 2003; Pan and Lu, 2003) and increasingly, the need to incorporate the internet and other new technologies (Chan et al., 2003; Liu, 2002).

In this situation, the internet should provide journalists with further opportunities for experimenting with new practices. Li Zhiping, the general manager of Eastday (www.eastday.com.cn), a portal jointly formed by the official media outlets in Shanghai, argues that given the internet's lack of fit to the party-media system, it is desirable to make the internet a 'special region' – that is, with special policy allowances – for reforms toward the inevitable goal of dismantling the existing system (Li, 2002). This thinking seems to be guiding some of the actual practices. For example, *The People's Daily*, the official organ of the Communist Party, maintains a huge website with almost all the features of the popular commercial news websites in the USA, such as news archives, special sections for important issues and events, frequent updates of the financial market and breaking news, discussion groups, online polls and so on. The same is true for the news websites by other major party-organ media outlets, including China Central Television (CCTV) and the official Xinhua News Agency (Liu, 2002).

However, there are limitations on the extent to which (and the ways in which) journalists in China can utilize the internet in their practices. The government has an ambivalent attitude toward the internet (Bi, 2001; Harwit and Clark, 2001). It tries to embrace the internet for the economic benefits that it can bring about but is deeply concerned with new sources of information and the proliferation of criticism of the government in cyberspace. Censorship of political information and viewpoints is prevalent (Qiu, 1998). More fundamentally, as long as journalists still have to work under the party control system, which is increasingly co-opting market forces for its maintenance (Pan and Chan, 2000), they cannot be free to utilize the alternative sources of information and viewpoints that are available online.¹ As a result, the use of the internet in news work is not yet fully routinized in Chinese newsrooms (Chan et al., 2003).

Political control also means that a truly 'alternative journalistic institution' – an institution that challenges the concentration of media and symbolic power (Couldry, 2003; Couldry and Curran, 2003) – is difficult to develop in cyberspace in China. In the late 1990s, commercial portals such as Sina (www.sina.com.cn) and Sohu.com (www.sohu.com.cn) began to catch the attention of the public. These portals provided real-time domestic and international news, as well as chatrooms for political topics. In 2000,

however, the Chinese Government put forward new regulations prohibiting commercial portals from gathering news directly (Xu, 2003).² It forced them to become news aggregators, 'pasting' news from officially approved outlets. The portals responded by diversifying information sources and improving packaging skills. But in general, by relying on their unique advantages in news resources and autonomy from their parent media outlet, official media organization news sites frequently enjoy advantages in the amount of news, speed of updating news, self-reported news and perceived status over those commercial portals (Peng, 1999; Tang and Yao, nd).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Based upon the widely-held recognition of differences between the traditional model of journalism and that typified by online news sites in China (Liu, 2002; Peng, 1999), we will begin by exploring Chinese journalists' orientations towards two different types of online media: news sites by official media outlets and commercial portals. This exploration is guided by the following research question:

RQ1: How do Chinese journalists use the internet and how do they perceive the credibility and professional utilities of the medium?

As discussed earlier, journalists are likely to hold relatively negative views on online media due to the need to protect the authority of their own profession. Moreover, they may not rate highly the news sites by online companies in China because of such media's commercial orientation and lack of original material. In the surveys, journalists were asked to rate the credibility of 'news websites operated by traditional media organizations'³ and 'news websites operated by online media companies' respectively. The first hypothesis of the present study is:

H1: Journalists in China rate the online news sites of established media organizations as being more credible than the news sites of online companies.

Research with citizen participants has shown that online news credibility is partly a function of familiarity with, and frequent exposure, to the internet (Johnson and Kaye, 1998). We expect the same to hold true among journalists. Hence our second hypothesis is:

H2: Chinese journalists' frequencies of using, and feeling adaptiveness to, the internet are positively related to their credibility ratings of both types of news sites.

More importantly, we contend that the differences in the way that journalists rate the two types of news sites are based on how they conceive journalism. Hence we expect the two credibility ratings to correlate with

different beliefs about journalism. In the surveys from which the data were drawn (Chan et al., 2004; Pan and Chan, 2003), we designed items to measure media role beliefs, media exemplar assessments, reporting values and specialist orientation. They are among the constituting elements of journalism as a model of news work in a specific media system. (These elements are explicated in the section on operationalization.) Given the diverse forces operating in China's media reforms (Lee, 2004; Pan and Lu, 2003), our analysis of how these beliefs about journalistic work may be related to evaluations of different news websites is, inevitably, more exploratory. Therefore, we established a research question instead of specific hypotheses:

RQ2: How do beliefs about journalistic work correlate differently with the credibility ratings of the two types of news sites?

To connect journalists' ratings of news sites to the ongoing media reforms, we should examine how such ratings and web usage relate to the variables that are indicative of different experiences of the media changes among journalists. It is quite possible, on the one hand, that the younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan journalists would use the internet more frequently and see online news sites as more credible. On the other hand, those who experience no competitive pressure from the web media may use the internet less frequently and see online news sites as less credible. Hence, our last research question is:

RQ3: How do individual differences in internet use and credibility ratings of the news sites on the web reflect different degrees of receptiveness toward the new medium, as well as to different models of journalism?

METHOD

The data analyzed came from surveys of random samples of journalists in two Chinese cities, Shanghai and Hangzhou, conducted in autumn 2002 and spring 2003 respectively. In both surveys, the target population were full-time media employees whose primary responsibility is to produce news content. In each city, a purposive sample of news media outlets was drawn to ensure the inclusion of the chief party organ paper, the chief evening or urban paper and all the state-owned TV and radio stations. In the media-rich city of Shanghai, three other newspapers were also selected, based on their circulation and overall influence.⁴ From each outlet, a systematic sample of journalists proportionate to size was drawn from its employee list. Trained field workers delivered the questionnaires and asked the selected respondents to complete them in their spare time. The respondents returned the completed questionnaires to the field workers a few days later. In Shanghai, 420 completed questionnaires were received, yielding a response

rate of 82 percent. In Hangzhou, an 88 percent completion rate resulted in 462 completed questionnaires. In the analyses, the two samples are combined with the city as a control variable in order to reach a greater degree of generalizability.

Measures

Website credibility. When measured as a single perceptual dimension, media credibility is operationally defined as believability (Bucy, 2003). Despite debates in the literature on the dimensionality of media credibility (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988; Self, 1996; Shaw, 1973), this study utilizes a single indicator as an overall measure of the believability of websites. For our purposes, we prefer the overall measure of believability to multi-indicator measures that have no clear conceptual explication of structure of dimensionality. In the survey, respondents were asked to express their agreement with each of these two statements on a five-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree): (1) 'news websites of traditional media outlets have high levels of credibility'; and (2) 'news websites of online companies have high levels of credibility'.

Web surfing behaviour and attitudes toward the internet. The same five-point scale was used to assess respondents' uses of, and attitudes towards, the internet. Three indices were created from six items. Level of adaptiveness to the web working environment is the average of: (1) 'I can use the internet skilfully in news reporting'; and (2) 'I am fully adapted to the multimedia working environment' (Cronbach's alpha = .83). Web surfing behaviour is the average of: (1) 'I often browse domestic news websites'; and (2) 'I often browse overseas news websites' (alpha = .63). Perceptions of internet potentials for news work is the average of: (1) 'the internet has brought a more open space for news work'; and (2) 'the internet has increased levels of competition in news work significantly' (alpha = .60).

Web use at work. The survey asked the respondents to indicate, on a five-point scale (where 1 = never and 5 = frequently) whether they often used various kinds of news and information websites at work to: (1) get news leads; (2) gather background information for news stories; and (3) search for news angles. Averaging across the items formed an index of using the internet in reporting (alpha = .78).

Specialist orientation. In past studies on journalists around the world, reading trade journals has been among the indicators of professionalism (McMane, 1998; Schoenbach et al., 1998). In this study we use it as a measure of specialist orientation. The assumption is that journalists who read trade publications regularly are more likely to consider journalism as a profession requiring specialized knowledge, and that they are making an effort to strengthen their proficiency at work. The surveys asked the respondents to indicate on a five-point scale (where 1 = never and 5 =

frequently) how often they: (1) read media and journalism research journals; (2) read trade magazines; and (3) browse the specialized websites devoted to issues and information on journalism. The items have sufficient interrelations to form a single factor ($\alpha = .71$). However, the three trade media differ in many ways. Academic journals are more theoretical in nature and contain a more diverse range of views. In contrast, trade magazines, mostly published by official media organizations, focus more on applied issues and are more ideologically blatant. Websites for the profession have more content that is not officially sanctioned; they also address more directly the 'hot button' issues in journalism. Based on this recognition, we used them as separate variables.

Evaluation of news media exemplars. The survey asked the respondents to indicate, on a five-point scale (where 1 = very far and 5 = very close), how close 12 media outlets were to their 'ideal medium'. Four outlets were party organs, with three national media outlets (*People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and CCTV) and one local party organ in each city (*Liberation Daily* in Shanghai and *Zhejiang Daily* in Hangzhou). Four overseas media outlets widely known among Chinese journalists were chosen to represent the professional news media. Two others were chosen to represent innovative news outlets emergent during the reforms (*Xinmin Evening* in Shanghai, *Qianjiang Evening* in Hangzhou and the nationally-circulated *Southern Weekend*). Finally, two web news outlets – Yahoo! China (<http://cn.yahoo.com>) and Sina (<http://www.sina.com.cn>) – were also included. An earlier study shows that evaluations of the party-organ media and the professional media reflect two belief systems about journalistic work, while evaluations of the two web media reveal the dual affiliations with the two belief systems. These indices are validated via extensive empirical assessments (Pan and Chan, 2003) and are used as predictors in this study.

Media role beliefs. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a five-point scale (where 1 = not at all important and 5 = very important), how important a list of 18 media functions are. The 18 statements were developed by referring to both past literature (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996) and the concrete situation in China. Five of them were eliminated due to poor fit in an exploratory factor analysis. The remaining 13 formed four clean factors, which correspond to the interpretive, disseminator, adversarial and popular advocacy roles of the media. Four indices were created by averaging across the items belonging to each factor (Cronbach's α ranges from .76 to .91).

Reporting values. A set of 10-point scaled questions (where 1 = slightly important and 10 = extremely important) asked respondents how important a set of factors is to news work. Importance of informativeness was the average of the importance of 'timeliness', 'factuality', 'just', and 'factual accuracy' ($\alpha = .84$). Similarly, importance of comprehensiveness was

derived from respondents' answers regarding 'balance' and 'completeness' ($\alpha = .77$), while importance of appeal was derived from 'interesting writing', 'new angle', 'depth' and 'scoop' ($\alpha = .84$).

Perceived competitive pressure. Respondents were asked whether they had ever felt competitive pressure in their everyday work. If they said 'yes', they were asked to indicate on a five-point scale (where 1 = a little and 5 = a lot) pressure from various sources. Feeling such pressure from the web media was used. Because each sample had about 15 percent to 16 percent of the respondents reporting that they felt no competitive pressure at all, this dichotomous variable is included in assessing the effect of perceived competition.

RESULTS

Internet perceptions and use

To begin the analysis, first we examine the data on perceptions and uses of the internet among journalists. Table 1 shows that on only one of the 11 measures, the two samples differ significantly. The Shanghai journalists reported using the internet to search for news leads more frequently than their Hangzhou counterparts. Overall, the differences between the two samples are mostly negligible.

In Table 1, we also see that journalists in both cities gave higher credibility ratings to the news sites by traditional media outlets than the sites by commercial online companies. The differences between the two ratings are highly significant. In addition, the news sites by traditional media outlets received ratings significantly higher than the scale's midpoint, while the news sites by commercial online companies received ratings significantly lower than the midpoint. The result supports H1 and is consistent with similar observations from the USA, where journalists in traditional media tend to view online companies' news sites less positively.

The situation is more complicated when we place the evidence in a broader context. Among the 12 media exemplars that the respondents evaluated, the two commercial online news sites were viewed positively, with mean ratings significantly higher than the scale midpoint. However, three of the five official media received mean ratings significantly lower than the scale midpoint. Clearly, the journalists did not generalize their low evaluations of the official media to the websites that these media outlets operated. As research on such websites shows (see Liu, 2002; Peng, 2002), the official media outlet websites, compared with their traditional media parents, are more information and entertainment-oriented, are more diverse in content and, presumably, serve somewhat different functions.

Regarding other items, Table 1 shows that the journalists in the two cities are similarly confident that they can work well within the new media

• Table 1 Means (standard deviation) of internet perceptions and use¹

MEASURES	SHANGHAI (N = 420)	HANGZHOU (N = 462)	t-VALUE
Credibility			
News websites by traditional media outlets have high levels of credibility	3.34 (.93)	3.39 (.90)	-.80
News websites by commercial portals have high levels of credibility	2.68 (.81)	2.69 (.82)	-.30
Adaptiveness			
I can use the internet to do reporting and editing work skillfully	3.75 (.95)	3.75 (.94)	.02
I am well adapted into the multimedia work environment	3.72 (.84)	3.75 (.87)	-.51
Web surfing			
I often browse domestic news websites	4.03 (.83)	4.01 (.81)	.47
I often browse overseas news websites	3.53 (1.03)	3.40 (1.02)	1.90
Perceived impact			
The internet has opened up space for news work	4.06 (.81)	4.14 (.79)	-1.49
The web media have increased competitiveness of news work	3.78 (.94)	3.81 (.99)	-.50
Web use in one's work			
Searching for news leads	4.02 (1.17)	3.76 (1.23)	3.14**
Collecting background information for a story	4.23 (1.02)	4.22 (.97)	.19
Looking for an angle for a story	3.62 (1.24)	3.59 (1.20)	.40

** $p < .01$.

¹ Missing values were replaced by within-sample means.

environment. They surf various news websites frequently, using domestic sites much more than overseas sites. In both cities, they agree with the statement that the internet has opened up space for, and increased competition in, news work. Journalists use the internet frequently in news work, although their usage for news leads and news angles is significantly less frequent than for background information (t -values in paired t -tests range from 4.61 to 12.99, $p < .001$ in all cases).

Empirical correlates of credibility ratings

Table 2 summarizes the results of a series of hierarchical regression designed to explore the correlates of credibility ratings. The 11 demographic variables capturing journalists' individual characteristics, organizational position and

• Table 2 Correlates of website credibility evaluations (N = 882)¹

CORRELATES		CREDIBILITY OF NEWS SITES BY	
		TRADITIONAL MEDIA	COMMERCIAL PORTALS
Demographics	R ²	.015	.014
Web usage and attitudes			
Adaptiveness		.095*	-.053
Web surfing frequencies		.181**	.084*
Perceived impact		.052	.190**
	ΔR ²	.066**	.056**
Media role beliefs			
Interpretive		.098*	.072
Disseminator		.054	-.042
Popular advocacy		.112**	-.005
Adversarial		-.086*	.094*
	ΔR ²	.051**	.016**
Media exemplar closer to ideal			
Party organs		.226**	.001
Professional media		.025	-.018
Web media		.033	.190**
	ΔR ²	.052**	.048**
Reporting values			
Informativeness		.029	-.179**
Comprehensiveness		.080*	.156**
Appeal		.062	.151**
	ΔR ²	.020**	.043**
Specialist orientation			
Theoretical magazine reading		-.043	.025
Trade magazine reading		.085*	-.112**
Trade website browsing		.121**	.105**
	ΔR ²	.022**	.027**
	Total R ²	.226***	.204***

* p ≤ .05; ** p ≤ .01.

¹ Eleven demographic variables were entered as the first block and each set of the correlates shown in the table was entered one by one afterwards. The demographic variables are: gender, age, years in journalism, educational level, monthly income, whether they majored in journalism or communication, amount of overseas experience, media type (broadcasting vs. print), whether they hold an administrative position in their organization, whether they plan on being in journalism in five years, and which city they work in. None of them has a robust relationship with either of the dependent variables.

² Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

city of residency have no relationships with either of the credibility ratings. They are not presented in Table 2 for simplicity. The other variables were entered into the regression in separate blocks.

H2 predicts positive correlations of credibility ratings with web attitudes and web usage. By and large, the hypothesis is supported. The three predictors in the 'web attitudes and usage' category account for 6.6 percent of the variance of credibility ratings of traditional news media's sites. Two of them (feeling well adapted into the web environment and surfing the web frequently) make a unique contribution to the credibility rating, as shown by the significant positive regression coefficients. The three variables also account for 5.6 percent of variance in the credibility ratings of the news sites by online companies. However, different from the credibility ratings of the news sites by traditional media, the perceived impact of the internet comes out as the strongest correlate of credibility ratings regarding the online companies' news sites. There is no significant unique effect of adaptiveness to the web on credibility ratings.

The remaining panels in Table 2 address the second research question in three different aspects: leaning towards either the party journalism or professionalism paradigm, reporting values, and specialist orientation. In an earlier study (Pan and Chan, 2003), it was shown that emphasizing the interpretive and popular advocacy roles of the media, de-emphasizing the adversarial role of the media and praising party organs indicate the belief system of party journalism. The belief system of journalistic professionalism, meanwhile, is revealed by an emphasis on the disseminating role of the media and positive evaluations of professional media exemplars.

Given these background findings, the results in Table 2 show that journalists used the model of party journalism as their lens when evaluating the credibility of websites by the traditional media. Emphases on the media's interpretive and popular advocacy roles, as well as praising party organs, are positively correlated with the credibility ratings of such websites. Emphasis on the adversarial role is negatively related to perceived credibility. The credibility rating of the sites by commercial online companies is rooted in a different belief system. It is correlated significantly with emphasizing the media's adversarial role and considering the web as an ideal medium. Together, the results suggest that the journalists placed the two types of news sites in very different cognitive domains and, consequently, used different criteria.

On the one hand, the credibility ratings of the two types of news sites are related to different reporting values. The three value variables together contribute 2 percent of variance in rating of the sites by traditional media and 4.3 percent of variance in ratings of the sites by online companies. However, only emphasis on comprehensiveness is related significantly to the perceived credibility of traditional news media's websites. On the other hand, the credibility rating of online companies' sites is related positively to an emphasis on comprehensiveness and appeal and negatively to an emphasis on informativeness. These findings strongly suggest that Chinese journalists

see online news provided by the two types of websites as embodying two different sets of reporting values.

Journalists' exposure to trade publications is related also to their evaluation of news sites. The three variables together contribute 2.2 percent to 2.7 percent of variance in the credibility ratings. Yet again, exposure to each individual trade publication correlates differently to the two credibility ratings. While reading trade magazines and browsing dedicated trade websites both contribute positively to higher credibility ratings of the news sites by traditional media, they have opposing relations with the credibility ratings of the news sites by online companies. Frequent reading of trade magazines, the publications that articulate the traditional mode of journalism and party press discourse, has a significant negative correlation with the credibility rating of news sites by online companies.

Empirical correlates of web usage

While individual differences in demographic characteristics do not contribute in any direct way to news site credibility ratings, it does not mean that they are inconsequential. Given the results in Table 2 showing the positive relationships between frequent use and credibility ratings, it is useful to examine individual differences in web usage and to treat such usage as a mediating factor between social locations and news site credibility ratings. Such theoretical inferences will be based on our empirical answer to the third research question.

As shown in Table 3, there are significant individual differences in how frequently the journalists use the web. The two types of web usage are correlated with different predictors. General web surfing is more frequent among younger journalists and those who have had more overseas experiences. Using the web in news reporting is more frequent among younger and better educated journalists with higher incomes. While surfing the internet is generally a young people's trade mark, using the web in news reporting is indicative of journalists' sophistication and competence in doing their job in the new media environment. Therefore, it is related to education and income, presumably the antecedent and reward of sophistication and competence.

Using the internet frequently is related also to feeling competitive pressure from the web media. It is possible that frequent usage brings heightened awareness of the internet's potential and increasing significance to one's life and work. This interpretation is supported by the strong positive correlation between web usage and the two web perception variables. Feeling adapted to the internet environment is strongly related to frequent web surfing and frequent use of the internet in one's work. Similarly significant, albeit weaker, positive relationships are found with the perceived potential of the internet in journalistic work.

• Table 3 Hierarchical regression analysis on internet use behavior (N = 882)¹

	WEB SURFING	INTERNET USE AT WORK
Step 1		
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	-.001	.053
Age	-.186**	-.281**
Years in journalism	-.063	.001
Education (5-point scale)	-.010	.135**
Combined monthly income	.059	.117**
Journalism/communication major	.034	.056
Overseas exposure	.149**	.018
Media type (print)	-.048	-.057
No administrative position	-.017	-.010
In journalism 5 years from now	.017	.002
City (1 = Shanghai, 2 = Hangzhou)	-.032	-.036
Adjusted R ²	.069**	.122**
Competition		
Feel no competitive pressure	-.021	.010
Feel competition from web media	.139**	.095*
ΔR ²	.023**	.008*
Web orientation		
Adaptiveness	.507**	.257**
Perceived impact	.103**	.150**
ΔR ²	.274**	.106**
Credibility ratings of		
Mainstream news sites	.218**	.096**
Commercial news sites	.061	.003
ΔR ²	.056**	.009**
Web surfing		
Web surfing	—	.255**
ΔR ²	—	.060**

* p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01.

¹ Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

Finally, to demonstrate further the relationship between internet usage and credibility ratings, we also placed the ratings as a set of correlates. Table 3 shows that when the two credibility ratings are controlled against each other, only the credibility of traditional news media's websites is significantly related to web surfing and using the internet at work. In other words, among Chinese journalists, the positive loop between use and perceived credibility is applicable mainly to the sites of traditional media.

DISCUSSION

The analysis adds to our understanding of how journalists evaluate the credibility of news websites and how such evaluations may be contextualized. First, Chinese journalists rate online companies' websites as

significantly less credible than the mainstream media websites. This finding points to an apparent similarity between journalists in China and their counterparts in western liberal democracies. Despite differences in media systems and operational models of mainstream journalism in different societies, practitioners tend to value the established model of journalism more highly than the newly-developed, alternative online journalism. This could represent an informed judgement – journalists understand what constitutes quality journalism and they recognize that the procedure of doing ‘mainstream journalism’ has built-in mechanisms for quality control. In China, the rating differential can be reflective also of a structural imbalance introduced by government regulation of the internet, which deprives non-traditional media’s online news sites of the opportunity to establish their own credibility through independent news gathering operations.

Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the negative judgement of online news sites can be partially a result of a will to defend the established authority of one’s own profession and reaffirm blurring institutional boundaries. It can be part of a process of ‘news repair’ (Bennett et al., 1985; Reese, 1990), through which journalists attempt to reconfirm the legitimacy and validity of their own model of journalism. This latter interpretation receives support from the present study in that Chinese journalists’ ratings of online news sites were found to be related to the models of journalism that they uphold. More specifically, journalists in China evaluated the news sites of traditional media organizations through the lens of the party journalism paradigm (Pan and Chan, 2003). To them, the credibility of these news sites had to be based on whether it was performing the roles either complementary or supplementary to the official party media. The journalists who uphold the party journalism model as ideal and who think of these news sites as enhancing this model would tend to have a higher evaluation of the sites’ credibility. The flipside is that journalists who dismiss the party journalism model and who think of online news sites as deviating from such a model would exhibit the opposite tendency.

However, the party journalism model was used as a guidepost mainly for the rating of the credibility of traditional media’s news sites. An important finding of this study is that journalists’ credibility ratings of the two types of online news sites have different correlates. The ratings of the online companies’ sites correlate more with emphasis on the adversarial role, less frequent reading of official trade magazines and the reporting values of comprehensiveness and appeal. Nevertheless, these patterns are insufficient to conclude that Chinese journalists rely on the ideas of journalistic professionalism in evaluating these alternative online sites. Journalistic professionalism in China is fragmented and inconsistent, manifesting often in narrowly confined and situated contexts (Pan and Lu, 2003). There are

other ideational systems influencing how journalists see their own work and evaluate their job (Lee, 2004). It would be an oversimplification to conclude that the non-party journalism necessarily indicates professional journalism. In fact, we cannot even assume that Chinese journalists have a coherent understanding of what commercial online news sites represent. While the relationship between the credibility ratings of these sites and emphasis on the adversarial role of the media point to the perceived critical function of these sites, the relationship between emphasis on audience appeal as a reporting value and credibility seems to suggest online news as 'infotainment'.

However, these arguments are not to suggest that journalists in China do not find online companies' websites valuable. In fact, the respondents recognized the value of the internet in opening up a wider space for journalism. This observation complements the findings on how the ratings of online companies' sites correlate with media role beliefs and reporting values. Given the tight political control of the mainstream media, there is indeed a tendency among Chinese journalists to see (or perhaps wish for) online media as an alternative institution.

Certainly, this argument needs to be qualified. The online media in China are not totally free from political control. Through regulations, the Chinese Government has been trying to set up an 'online media order', which privileges official media and has the effect of co-opting the new medium into the marketized authoritarian media system (Chan and Qiu, 2002). Thus, the structural pressure is toward more similarities between online and mainstream news media. In other words, the government control of mainstream media is a contextual feature in China contributing to the characteristic of the online companies' sites. Yet at the same time, government control of the internet undermines the potential of such online media to truly constitute an 'alternative journalistic institution' (Couldry and Curran, 2003). These contextual factors must be considered in studies on how mainstream journalism and online journalism may differ and be intertwined in the increasingly internet-connected world.

This study also contributes to media credibility research by foregrounding different models of journalism and examining how they may be reflected in credibility ratings. By focusing on journalists, we are asserting that the most fundamental changes associated with shifting news delivery from the traditional media to the internet are the mix of 'mediating agencies' in society (Curran, 2002) and the changing rules of the game of journalism (Boczkowski, nd; Gordon, 2003). These changes may reshape the journalistic profession and the cultural construction of news (Boczkowski, nd). While professional journalists are unlikely to surrender wholesale to the new networked world, nonetheless they may recognize the unique features of online media and utilize the internet to rearticulate the tenets and

parameters of their professional institution (McCoy, 2001). In China, the forces inducing such rearticulation may contribute to further erosion of the party press system, as manifested partly in the adaptations being made by the official party media in response to the emergent model of online journalism (Peng, 1999).

It is clear that the overall pattern found in the USA – that usage breeds familiarity and, in turn, more positive evaluation (Johnson and Kaye, 1998, 2002) – is robust and generalizable to Chinese journalists. Those who feel efficacious with the new medium use it more often; those who use it more frequently for non-work-related purposes tend to see the great potential of the new medium for their work and thus use it more in their work. However, the relationship between use and believability is not straightforward. To Chinese journalists, believability is filtered through their lens of how journalism ought to be done.

The lack of any direct effects of individual demographics on website credibility ratings suggests further that internet usage is an essential mediating venue for individuals to render judgements on the online media. In this light, the findings that younger and better educated journalists use the internet more frequently carry even greater sociological implications. As the young and better educated cohorts begin to populate more of the journalism profession in China, one should expect further transformation of the party press system and greater changes in the journalism institution.

This study seeks to identify the correlates of website credibility and suggests the possible routes through which such evaluations are rendered. It does not seek to test a clearly formulated theory. Nor does it establish *a priori*, how differential ratings of the two types of websites might relate to contesting ideational systems on journalism in China. In addition, the single-item measure of website credibility has limited our ability to examine the cognitive structure behind such evaluations. All these limitations need to be addressed in future research. What we have demonstrated here is the value of examining journalists' evaluation of media credibility as situated in, and indicative of, their normative beliefs. This should be a theoretically valuable line of enquiry for research on journalism in the new media world.

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Notes

- 1 For example, a major portal, Enorth (<http://www.enorth.com.cn>), claims that it was formed under the orchestration of the Tianjin Municipal Party propaganda department, with the capital investment and pooling of news sources from all official media outlets in Tianjin. One year after it was open, the party's Propaganda Ministry

- named it 'one of the top 10 mainstream news sites'. The daily content of this site is reviewed by both the 1106 Group in the Propaganda Ministry and the Office of Overseas Propaganda (see <http://www.enorth.com.cn/index/about/index.htm>).
- 2 The regulation also includes content restrictions for licensed internet content providers (ICP). More recently, the 2003 rules for issuing nationally standard licenses to officially accredited journalists explicitly exclude the editorial personnel of such ICPs. Three directives constitute the overall regulatory structure. The first was issued by the State Council on 25 September 2000 (see <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/html/Dir/2000/09/25/0625.htm>): it distinguishes commercial and non-commercial websites and enlisted nine prohibited content categories. This was expanded on 27 June 2002 in a directive issued jointly by the Ministry of the Information Industry (MII) and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), which designates GAPP and its local offices as the enforcement agency of all internet publication regulations. It expanded the nine prohibited categories to 10 (see http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2002-07-16/content_484382.htm). The third directive was issued jointly by the State Council News Office and the MII on 7 November 2000, specifically on news publications on the web. It differentiates between the news sites operated by official media organizations and non-media companies. Only the former may engage in primary news reporting; the latter may receive approval for carrying in full or in repackaged forms the news reported by official media organizations. On this basis, the GAPP Directive on Accrediting and Licensing Journalists states explicitly that editorial staff of non-media news sites will not be included (see <http://press.gapp.gov.cn/web/zixun/31.htm>).
 - 3 In the Chinese context, this label is well understood to represent the news sites operated by official media organizations. There is ambiguity with regard to those portals that are joint ventures of major official media organizations in a city, for example, Qianlong (www.qianlong.com.cn) in Beijing, Eastday.com (<http://www.eastday.com.cn>) in Shanghai and Nanfang.com (<http://nanfang.com.cn>) in Guangzhou. Based on the interviews that we conducted in the fieldwork prior to the surveys, we feel confident in assuming that the journalists in the sample in general have the knowledge of the 'official' status of these portals and their differentiation from other commercial portals.
 - 4 While all the media in China are state-owned, there are still differences among media outlets in their structural status. The two cities also differ in their media structures. As a provincial level municipality and one of the most economically-developed cities in China, Shanghai has two radio stations, two TV stations and one municipal party-organ newspaper which has formed a newspaper group with several subsidiaries. The city has a nationally-influential evening paper (*Xinmin Evening*) and a nationally-influential daily (*Wenhui Daily*). Both are subsidiaries of the same state-owned newspaper group. The main local media organizations also own several other smaller newspapers. In contrast, Hangzhou has media outlets at two different administrative levels: those that belong to the provincial government of Zhejiang province and those controlled by the municipal government of Hangzhou. At each level, there is one radio station, one TV station and one party-organ newspaper. At the municipal level, there is also an evening paper. The selection of media outlets to be included in the surveys took into consideration such structural layouts in the two cities.

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