

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs  
in Chinese Political Life**

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*Despite censorship, Chinese bloggers routinely uncover corruption, help solve social problems, and even pressure state officials to change policy. The power of online opinion is undisputed in individual cases, but the overall effect of blog discourse on Chinese political life is unclear. Do blogs relieve pressure for political change by allowing troublemakers to vent frustrations in a marginal medium, or are they integrated with the larger system of political communication in China, inspiring political activism and building communities of like-minded activists? Using large-scale content analysis and specific case studies, I argue that blogs serve as a “safety valve” on issues where the mainstream media set the agenda, and a “pressure cooker” on issues where bloggers get ahead of journalists.*

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In early July 2009, over a thousand Uyghur residents of the western Chinese city of Ürümqi rioted to protest the reported deaths of two Uyghur factory workers in a brawl in far away Guangdong (Wong, 2009). News of the factory fight was quickly carried to Ürümqi by Internet discussion groups, blogs, and SMS text messages, precipitating the protests and heightening tensions between Han and Uyghur citizens (Watts, 2009). Just 10 years earlier, tight censorship and a lack of reliable information would almost certainly have prevented news of the initial fracas from ever reaching Xinjiang, and it is likely that the deaths of nearly 200 people and thousands of injuries (Yan, Geng, & Yuan, 2009) would have been prevented.

But the Internet can have a role in reducing tensions and preventing violence as well. After the city of Beijing announced in late 2006 that it was conducting a massive cull of unregistered and stray dogs, nearly 3,000 people peacefully gathered outside the Beijing Zoo to protest the move. Although the police arrested dozens of activists, all were released and the planned cull was canceled after pressure online convinced the Beijing government that to go ahead would create too much social tension (Interview by author, 14 January 2008).

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It is nearly axiomatic that the Internet has an increasing impact on Chinese political life, but scholars are divided as to whether online discourse and Internet activism leads to more protests and greater social tension, as happened with the 2009 Ürümqi riots, or allows people to nonviolently express their discontent and act as a social safety valve, as in the Beijing dog-culling protests. In this article, I take a quantitative approach, augmented by miniature case studies, to argue that the role of the Chinese Internet, and blogs in particular, varies depending on the issue and its treatment in the print media. Investigating this relationship between blogs and traditional media is important to understanding state reaction to social events.

Specifically, I argue that when Internet content precedes print media and sets the agenda, political or social tensions are likely to increase. By contrast, on those issues where Internet commentary follows newspapers' broaching of similar topics, online discussion can help soothe an inflamed mass public. The Chinese Party/state, in short, does not deal well with surprises and tends to react less repressively to "known" issues than novel ones. Below, I first discuss the background and previous scholarly work on the Chinese Internet before moving into the methodology and results of this project.

### **Digital media and political communication in China**

There are now over 200 million blogs clearly in China (China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), 2010; Shirk, 2011). From forcing corruption investigations of local officials (Hewitt, 2010) to shaping foreign policy (Xiao, 2011b), Chinese bloggers are growing in political and social clout. Yet there is little agreement about how opinion emerges online and whether online public participation generally increases or reduces social tensions.

Previous research concentrates on how Internet users in China either challenge or reinforce state power. Few studies trace the relationships between online content, traditional media, and the consequences for state and society. Moreover, communication scholar Bu Wei notes that despite 409 Chinese language articles published on the Chinese Internet between 1990 and 2008, only around 2% used content analysis, 1% employed fieldwork, and an even smaller percentage relied on survey data (Bu, 2008). More recent work has found that of 31 articles analyzing the Chinese media, only 13% focused on web content (Stockmann, 2010).

And those scholars who study the Chinese Internet often disagree about its political impact. MacKinnon (2008, p. 33), for example, claims that blogs "serve as a 'safety valve' by allowing enough room for a sufficiently wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence . . . before considering taking their gripes to the streets" (p.33). Other observers take a similar perspective, sometimes arguing that the Chinese media increasingly helps buttress CCP control by effectively propagandizing citizens (Jiang, 2010; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Zhou, 2009). But some scholars disagree, claiming that the Internet creates a quasi-public sphere in which state control is criticized and collective action is mobilized (Xiao, 2011a). Corresponding work has found that the Internet has

made it more difficult for the state to control the free flow of information and is thus creating a democratic forum that challenges view of power and authority (Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2008).

Despite their disagreements, scholars concur on the increasing importance of the Internet in Chinese public life. If nothing else, the Internet has often become the first place news appears and therefore sets the agenda for other media (Shirk, 2011). Still, less than one-third of Chinese citizens regularly access online content, and many fewer have blogs (CNNIC, 2010). Radio, newspapers, and television remain potent forces in shaping Chinese public opinion, and examining the Internet in isolation from these other media misses a large part of the story.

I therefore examine the relationship between Chinese blogs, newspapers, and state action. Bloggers do not monopolize Chinese mass electronic communication. Bulletin board services (BBS) continued to be popular, especially on college campuses. Twitter-like microblogging services, especially Sina.com's Weibo site, have recently surged in popularity and importance (Wines & LaFraniere, 2011). Even though microblogging, BBS services, and instant messaging platforms such as MSN and QQ are all important in shaping Chinese Internet communication, blogs have several features that make analysis especially attractive.

First, and most importantly, blogs have surged in popularity in recent years. China has the largest community of bloggers in the world, and they have been critical in exposing and popularizing official and corporate misdeeds. Second, data collection from blogs is significantly easier than from either BBS or microblogs, both of which often have restricted access or ephemeral, unarchived content. Moreover, because even active bloggers update content a few times a day at most, blogs are less affected by hourly trends and quickly passing fads than other services. This regularity makes it easier to spot mutual influence and improves the reliability of the results. And third, this work builds on the efforts of other scholars like Esarey and Xiao (2008, 2011) and MacKinnon (2008) to examine the political impact of blogging in China. In short, although bloggers might not represent the entire world of Chinese Internet opinion, they are an important component overdue for analysis.

So what *is* the impact of Chinese blogging? What are the relationships between blogs and the traditional media? And does blogging help sustain the regime, or make political change more likely?

## Methods

This project utilized a computer-assisted content analysis (CCA) to investigate macroscale comparisons between blog and newspaper content, with interviews and miniature case studies helping flesh out causal mechanisms in greater detail. The blog component of the CCA is based on 2,198 blog updates posted between August 30 and November 7, 2010.<sup>1</sup> Each of these 70 days is represented by an average of 27.5 blog posts, sorted by date alone from the Google search engine using the five most common terms in Chinese (*de*, *shi*, *yi*, *bu*, and *le*). This is roughly analogous

to searching for “a,” “an,” “the,” “I,” or “to be” in English. The broad capture technique means that although Google results do not index the whole Internet and are likely to be subtly biased, these blog posts should be fairly representative of the Chinese blogging population.<sup>2</sup>

The search was conducted using Google’s Advanced Blog Search site in late 2010, restricting results to blogs that use simplified Chinese characters, the form of written Chinese used almost exclusively in mainland China and Singapore.<sup>3</sup> Careful screening ensured that the sample had few, if any, blog posts from Singapore or other areas outside China.<sup>4</sup> Finally, for ease of processing I downloaded only those results with a \*.htm or \*.html file suffix, meaning blogs using different file types (approximately 25% of the total) were excluded. There is no reason to think that blogs with an HTML file suffix should have systematically different content than the blog population at large.

Set against these blog posts are 4,363 articles downloaded during the same 70-day time period from 19 newspapers, representing all major regions of China except the Northeast and far West. The papers are based on a subset of newspapers analyzed for previous projects, and the articles were downloaded unsorted from the China Core Newspaper Database.<sup>5</sup> Although the administrators apparently use some selection criteria when posting articles, the corpus is varied and substantial enough to ensure representativeness of the Chinese newspaper market.

A program called Yoshikoder analyzed the corpus after a Java-based segmenter available at MandarinTools.net was used to insert white spaces between words.<sup>6</sup> The analysis consisted of checking the blog and newspaper corpus against a dictionary consisting of 34 categories derived from an actor analysis of the vocabularies of a separate subset of blog and newspaper content.<sup>7</sup> After building the dictionary, this subset was discarded and took no part in the data analysis to avoid bias (see also Popping, 2000). The dictionary also included two very large (<10,000 words) lists of all (or nearly all) positive and negative terms in Chinese, developed by researchers at the National Taiwan University,<sup>8</sup> that together allow an accurate measure of a text’s overall sentiment. A list of the relative frequency of words in the topic categories is displayed in Table 1.

In line with conventional expectations, bloggers discussed sports, family and love life, health and beauty, mobile phones, cars, the arts, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, combative political themes, and Internet-related topics much more often than newspaper articles. Politics, the military, business/finance and agricultural issues, by contrast, were covered substantially more in newspapers than by bloggers. In addition, bloggers were much more negative and critical than newspaper journalists, using more than twice as many negative emotion words per article, on average, and employing about 10% fewer positive emotional terms. This was unsurprising because newspapers that propaganda authorities judge as being too consistently negative are disciplined, and reporters can face serious consequences for authoring too many articles critical of political or social phenomena (He, 2004, p. 17). More unexpected was the fact that bloggers and newspaper journalists discuss corruption and illegal

**Table 1** Mean Frequency of Keywords in Chinese Newspapers and Blogs per Article or Post

	Category	Newspaper	Blog	Difference
Keywords that appear in blogs and newspapers at about the same rate	Science and Medicine	1.52	1.64	-0.12
	Currency War	0.65	0.69	-0.04
	Corruption and Illegality	0.35	0.35	0
	“Mingan” Words	0.07	0.07	0.01
	Politics: Foreign	0.1	0.07	0.03
	Food and Consumables	0.7	0.61	0.09
Keywords that appear in blogs more than newspapers	Education	3.87	3.58	0.29
	Sentiment: Negative	18.73	41.21	-22.48***
	Sentiment	71.24	89.3	-18.06**
	Internet	1.1	7.48	-6.38***
	Family and Love	0.74	3.58	-2.85***
	Mobile Phones	0.23	1.66	-1.43***
	Media	0.86	2	-1.14***
	Sports	0.98	1.57	-0.59***
	Health and Beauty	0.25	0.77	-0.52***
	Cars	0.78	1.17	-0.4**
	“Gaoliang” Words	0.95	1.32	-0.37***
	Arts	1.72	1.95	-0.23*
	Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands	0.01	0.16	-0.15***
	Disasters	0.43	0.58	-0.15**
	Politics: Combative	0.67	0.81	-0.14*
Religion	0.07	0.18	-0.11**	
“Yanjin” Words	0.02	0.06	-0.04***	
Keywords that appear in newspapers more than blogs	Politics	11.11	4.43	6.68***
	Sentiment: Positive	52.51	48.09	4.43**
	Business and Finance	8.17	5.24	2.93***
	Agriculture and Countryside	2.41	0.39	2.01***
	Construction and Real Estate	2.26	1.08	1.17***
	Transport	1.11	0.41	0.71***
	Military	2.02	1.36	0.66***
	Environment	1.09	0.58	0.51***
	Legal	1.64	1.35	0.29*
Energy	0.48	0.21	0.27***	

*Note:* The sample period was 30 August to 7 November 2010. *t* test results assume unequal variances.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

activities equally, a potential challenge to who see the Internet as the source for “full information about how serious corruption is in the private sector” (Zheng, 2008, p. 122).

After processing the text in Yoshikoder, I used autoregressive integrated moving analysis (ARIMA) to establish time series across each of the 34 issues on both

blog and newspaper files. ARIMA models were selected by SPSS to minimize the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). Next, the white noise residuals for blog and newspaper data were cross-correlated using a 7-day lag. Ljung-Box statistics indicated that all of the residuals are independently distributed except for the blog corpus's Construction/Real Estate ( $p < .01$ ) and Sentiment-Positive categories ( $p < .1$ ). A 7-day lag is standard for this type of research (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002; Wallsten, 2007). This mechanism allowed me both to gauge the extent of mutual influence between blogs and newspapers, and to estimate the time lag on this influence, as seen in the selected categories of Table 2.<sup>9</sup>

The qualitative discussion throughout is based on analysis of 11 Internet-related "mass incidents," listed in Table 3, which have taken place in China between 2003 and 2011. These represent both some of the most discussed and analyzed recent incidents, including the 2003 Sun Zhigang case and the 2009 Ürümqi riots. They also represent cases that are relatively obscure, such as the 2006 Chongqing literary inquisition or the 2006 Beijing dog culling protests. Note that I am not aiming for a representative sample of recent Chinese "mass incidents," if such a sample were even possible, but rather to showcase the dynamics of cases that fit the broad pattern suggested by the quantitative results. The cases, in other words, were selected to flesh out microscale dynamics and mechanisms impossible to uncover with large-scale content analysis alone.

## Results

The quantitative results allow estimation of both the magnitude of the mutual influence between blog posts and newspaper articles, and the time lag of this influence. Two of the correlations, in the categories of sports and the threatened 2010 U.S.–China currency war, provide some qualitative assurance that the numbers are accurate. Because sports coverage is ephemeral, it is unsurprising to see newspapers and blogs discussing the same issues at the same time, with little spillover in previous or subsequent days. Similarly, the threatened currency war over the value of the Chinese RMB that flared up briefly during this period was epiphenomenal and did not reflect sustained public attention, though it continues to flare up periodically. Likewise, environmental topics and health and beauty issues tend to be discussed simultaneously online and in print.

### Issues in which newspapers take the lead

Newspapers are predicted to drive coverage on a number of issues, including discussions of energy developments and policy. Coverage of energy issues in the newspapers on Day 1, for example, is predicted to lead to increased discussion of these issues in blogs on Days 2, 4, and 5, with the effect especially pronounced on Day 2. A probable explanation is that energy discussions are often complicated and technical, making them among the least common of all analyzed categories. Discussions of energy issues are unlikely to arise spontaneously and are thus more likely than other categories to be triggered by important developments announced first in the newspapers.

**Table 2** Selected Time-Lagged Correlations Between the Appearance of Keywords in Chinese Newspapers and Blogs, 2010

Lag (days)	Newspaper Coverage Precedes Blogs							Synchronous							Newspaper Coverage Follows Blogs																	
	-7	-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	+6	+7	-7	-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	+6	+7		
Agriculture/rural	-.14	.07	-.06	.01	-.17	-.02	.01	.07	.05	-.03	-.11	-.15	.26*	-.06	.06	.08	.07	-.15	.12	-.14	.10	.06	.04	.07	.03	.02	-.05	.03	-.09	.26*		
Arts	.08	.07	-.15	.12	-.14	-.10	-.07	.00	-.03	-.01	-.05	-.03	.05	-.02	-.02	-.10	-.15	.08	.08	.04	-.02	.07	.25*	-.10	.14	.15	.01	-.10	-.12	.09		
Corruption/illegal	-.09	.61**	-.12	.09	-.04	-.02	-.07	.04	.04	.04	.00	-.04	-.09	-.06	.00	-.07	.12	.08	-.02	-.07	-.09	.24*	-.03	.09	-.02	.10	-.09	-.02	.10			
Currency war	-.10	-.15	.08	.08	.04	-.02	-.07	.04	.04	.04	.00	-.04	-.09	-.06	.00	-.07	.12	.08	-.02	-.07	-.09	.24*	-.03	.09	-.02	.10	-.09	-.02	.10			
Diaoyu islands	.03	-.10	-.03	-.10	.45*	.00	-.04	-.09	-.06	.00	-.07	.12	.08	-.02	-.07	-.09	.24*	-.03	.09	-.02	.10	-.09	.24*	-.03	.09	-.02	.10	-.09	-.02	.10		
Disasters	.14	.04	.08	-.11	.15	-.07	.12	.08	-.02	-.07	-.09	.24*	-.03	.09	-.02	.10	-.09	.24*	-.03	.09	-.02	.10	-.09	.24*	-.03	.09	-.02	.10	-.09	-.02	.10	
Education	.09	-.12	.08	-.11	-.14	-.25*	-.19	-.06	-.08	-.11	-.15	-.20*	-.14	.17	.18	.02	.07	.10	.06	-.03	-.05	.18	.08	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	
Energy	.02	.07	.28*	.29*	-.06	.49*	.14	.07	.10	.23*	-.21*	.16	-.17	-.06	.17	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	
Environment	.01	.10	-.07	.10	-.01	-.07	-.06	-.15	.23*	-.21*	.16	-.17	-.06	.17	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	
Health/beauty	-.17	-.06	.15	-.10	-.03	.20*	-.20*	.11	.07	.02	.03	.12	.00	-.08	-.02	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10
Internet	.08	.13	-.01	-.12	-.11	.02	-.04	-.04	-.03	-.08	-.08	.24*	-.09	-.10	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04
Media	-.11	.09	.14	.13	.06	.02	.09	-.15	-.12	.28*	.08	.09	.00	-.08	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03
Religion	-.09	.10	.04	-.05	.00	.06	-.01	-.08	-.01	.07	-.07	.01	.34*	-.02	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05
Sports	.14	-.09	-.23	.17	-.02	-.08	.07	.28*	-.02	-.04	.01	.14	.05	-.08	-.02	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05
Politics	.00	-.03	.00	.21*	.06	.00	.03	.12	.01	-.03	-.02	-.15	-.03	-.20	-.12	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05	.05

*Note:* Some keywords that were not statistically significant or substantively interesting have been dropped from Table 2. These include: Business/Finance, Cars, Construction/Real Estate, Family/Love, Food/Consumables, “Gaoliang” Words, Legal, Military, “Ming’an” Words, Mobile Phones, Politics-Combative, Politics-Foreign, Science/Medicine, Sentiment-Negative, Sentiment-Positive, Transport, and “Yanjin” Words. Cells are correlation coefficients.

\* $p < .1$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 3** Selected Cases of Newspaper and Blog Agenda Setting

Incident	Who Set the Agenda?	Outcome
<i>Safety Valve Scenarios</i>		
Sun Zhigang's death in custody (2003)	Newspaper <i>Southern Metropolis Daily</i>	Uproar online and in newspapers, abolition of custody system, eventual arrest of journalists and editors who broke the story raising tensions in news media.
Chen Liangyu arrest (2007)	CCP, via its Xinhua News Agency	Newspaper publication only of official Xinhua copy; blog discussion lasted for months.
Xiamen PX protests (2007)	Bloggers, with strong central CCP support	Mass protests led to cancelation of proposed PX plant, widespread praise in newspapers for protestors and CCP.
Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute (2010)	Newspapers	Beijing took a much harder line with Japan than in years past, bloggers blew off steam online.
Dispute over rising energy prices (2011)	Newspapers	Little change in prices, but bloggers allowed wide latitude to criticize the CCP.
<i>Pressure Cooker Scenarios</i>		
Chongqing factory strike (2004)	Bloggers	Violent confrontation between protestors and police, proposed factory sale went ahead.
Literary inquisition in Chongqing (2006)	Bloggers	Uproar in newspapers, poet Qin Zhongfei released.
Li Gang case (2010)	Bloggers	Uproar online, suspect in hit-and-run case tried and imprisoned for 6 years.
Protests in Beijing of planned dog cull (2006)	Bloggers	Protestors arrested, but dog cull cancelled.
Ürümqi riots (2009)	Bloggers	Mass social unrest, scores dead.
Wenzhou train crash (2011)	Bloggers and microbloggers	Initial investigation into train crash, mass public dissatisfaction.

Newspapers are also predicted to drive political coverage, with an estimated lag of 4 days from newspaper story to blog discussion. This is unsurprising because the Internet is largely, though not entirely, depoliticized. Recent work has found that most “popular bloggers vary their content and only occasionally criticize the action (or inaction) of Chinese political leaders (Esarey & Xiao, 2008). The reluctance to broach political issues online has two likely components. First, bloggers who are overly political run the risk of attracting official attention, something often undesirable in

a country with the world's largest number of imprisoned Internet users (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2011). Second, since the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 and subsequent official clampdown on political activism, Chinese society remains deeply apolitical and most people devote their energy to economic or family pursuits.

More interestingly, newspaper coverage of corruption and illegal activities is predicted to precede blog discussion by 6 days. This finding is surprising given the increased role that some researchers assume blogs play in uncovering official corruption (Zheng, 2008), but might reflect newspapers' greater resources to conduct investigative journalism or journalists' greater awareness of the boundaries of acceptable coverage (Stern & Hassid, forthcoming). After newspapers break news on corruption, bloggers eventually note and comment on these stories, though any discussion of official corruption on Chinese blogs that strays too far is likely to be subject to heavy state censorship (MacKinnon, 2009; Zhou, 2009).

Censorship authorities and the so-called "50 cent party" (*wumao dang*), a group of Party/state employees supposedly paid 50 Chinese cents for every regime-praising post, quickly challenge or remove content on politically sensitive issues like corruption. At times a sensational story can explode online faster than censors can react, and when this happens newspapers often jump on the story as well. Under ordinary circumstances, however, it is clear that bloggers are reacting to, rather than initiating, coverage of corruption and illegality.

Equally unexpectedly, newspapers seem to drive coverage on the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands claimed by both Japan and China. In early September 2010, during the time of this study, the collision between a Chinese fishing trawler and a Japanese Coast Guard vessel in the disputed islands resulted in an acrimonious diplomatic standoff between the two countries. Chinese bloggers and Internet users reacted angrily to news that Japanese officials were detaining and considering charging Chinese captain Zhan Qixiong. Chinese blogger Han Han (2010) scathingly criticized the soft initial reaction by the Chinese government, accusing it of emasculating China's international sovereignty. Beijing quickly took a much harder line, an outcome many observers credited to online public opinion. Indeed, the quasi-official *Global Times* (2010) opined that even though "The Chinese government would never deliberately stir up domestic nationalism, because this will ultimately undermine China's own social order," on controversial international issues like the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute, "Media, especially the Internet, has [sic] become the main outlet that conveys grass-roots opinions." Despite this emphatic assertion, however, newspapers and official statements quickly (and quietly) set the agenda for online discussion of this incident rather than the blogosphere.

### Issues in which blogs take the lead

Unsurprisingly, coverage of Internet issues, which is based around terms such as "search," "download," "website," "link," and others, tended to happen 4 days earlier on blogs than in newspapers. This finding helps validate the results; it would indeed

be odd if coverage of Internet-related issues appeared first in newspapers and then later spread online.

Discussion of education-related issues in one medium tended to suppress discussion in the other. Newspaper coverage of education predicted decreased blog coverage 2 days later, and blog coverage predicted decreased newspaper coverage after a 4-day lag. A similar feedback loop between newspapers and blogs has been found in the United States (Wallsten, 2007).

Bloggers influenced newspaper reportage most often on sensitive topics such as religion, and on topics that are *seemingly* benign but have the potential to be quite sensitive, such as rural issues and the arts. These topics generally do not appeal to many Chinese newspaper readers. Agricultural issues, in particular, are unlikely to interest many urban readers, but once these topics have become “hot” online, mainstream journalists jump on board as well. For example, when Qin Zhongfei was arrested in 2006 after writing a poem satirizing the corruption of local officials in his small town near Chongqing, for example, the discussion quickly spread online. After a local resident “put up a blog post titled ‘A modern literary inquisition stuns Pengshui, Chongqing,’” the result was “like dropping a bomb online,” according to a story in the feisty newspaper *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*) (He, 2006). The story quickly spread in the traditional media and Qin was ultimately released, but bloggers were critical to securing the media’s initial attention to the story (Cody, 2007).

Religious topics, for which blog coverage precedes that of newspapers by 5 days, were the most overtly sensitive of the issues tested. In a country that is officially atheist, religion is rarely discussed in the mainstream media, and newspapers average only one religious-themed word per 15 or so articles. This comparative lack of coverage perhaps gives an opening to blogs to set the agenda on this topic, an agenda that papers carry forward after careful consideration of online opinion and the potentially sensitive issues involved.

Finally, blogs led the discussion of issues related to natural and man-made disasters, with newspapers following a predicted 4 days later. Discussion of disasters, especially those caused by the actions of officials or corporate executives, remains a sensitive topic in the Chinese media. Indeed, authorities specifically discourage newspapers from reporting disasters like train crashes or coal mine collapses, and reporters who do so too often risk sanction (Hassid, 2008). After such incidents become common knowledge online, however, officials may try to step in to shape further coverage and deflect blame (Bandurski, 2009).

## Discussion

Agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) appears to play a key role in determining whether bloggers and Internet commentators help increase or relieve social pressure. On issues where the print media or central government set the agenda, bloggers are allowed a great deal of latitude to write posts that are satirical or even harshly critical of official policy, so long as discussion remains online. The central CCP’s apparent complacency is well founded, relying on a sophisticated censorship apparatus that

keeps most newspaper reporters from even contemplating aggressive coverage (Hassid, 2008). Even the continuing commercialization of Chinese news media does not challenge the CCP's agenda-setting power because commercial papers are even more effective at conveying state-approved propaganda than Party papers (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011).

The central government is generally comfortable with newspaper coverage and rarely flinches at online discussion of even potentially sensitive topics such as corrupt local officials. When the event gains a great deal of international media coverage and it becomes impossible to impose a complete blackout on domestic news, the central government may allow newspapers to reprint copy from the official Xinhua news agency (Zhao, 2008). These articles are at times quite critical of local or even central government officials, as with one Xinhua News Agency report (2011) stating that in 2009 and 2010 over 1,000 Party/state officials had abused their positions by illegally detaining citizens and engaging in revenge and fraud.

Illegal detentions are a consistently sensitive topic in China. A national uproar over the 2003 death in custody of graphic designer Sun Zhigang resulted in an embarrassed local government and major changes to national policy toward detention of migrant laborers (Hand, 2006). When taken by surprise, however, central officials' lack of tolerance for dissent encourages offline action such as petitions, protests, or riots. Indeed, the fact that Sun Zhigang became a byword for state brutality ultimately led to the arrests of the journalists and editors responsible for initially publishing the article (Hassid, 2008). As these journalists learned, moving ahead of the CCP comfort zone and pressing for new rights or investigation into official mistakes is often a risky enterprise.

Recent incidents have continued to illustrate the CCP's desire to react quickly to online public pressure, while doing little to address the underlying causes of popular discontent. For example, after a night of drinking, 22-year-old Li Qiming crashed his car into two students on the Hebei University campus, injuring one and killing the other. After attempting to drive off and being caught by campus security, he reportedly said "Go ahead, sue me if you dare, my dad is [local deputy police chief] Li Gang" (China Daily, 2011). The case became such a *cause célèbre* that "my dad is Li Gang" (*wo ba shi Li Gang*) has become a popular Chinese saying to cynically avoid responsibility (BBC News, 2011). Despite a massive outcry both online and off (China Daily, 2011), Li Qiming was sentenced to only 6 years in prison and paid modest compensation to the students' families (BBC News Staff, 2011). This light punishment, itself only possible because of the pressure of bloggers and Internet users, has merely stoked public anger over officials' legal impunity. "If the settlement was intended to quash chatter about the Li Gang case," reporter Michael Wines writes, it "seems to have accomplished the opposite," with one student resignedly sighing that "This is the kind of society we live in. People who have power, they can cover up the sky" (Wines, 2010).

Similarly, bloggers and users of the Twitter-like Weibo.com microblogging service were critical in publicizing the details of a crash of two high-speed trains

near Wenzhou city, Zhejiang province on July 23, 2011 that killed over 40 people and injured hundreds. Although railway officials tried to cover up the accident, even going so far as to bury wrecked train cars quickly after the accident, 26 million messages about the tragedy were posted online, ultimately resulting in a reversed official stance and a more thorough investigation (Wines & LaFraniere, 2011). The fact that government officials agreed to further look into the crash seems like a victory for bloggers and Internet users, but few have high expectations that powerful officials will be held responsible. Public tension about official cover-ups, social inequality, and shoddy construction has only increased.

By getting ahead of official coverage, bloggers and Internet users ultimately increased social tensions and increased the growing awareness of Chinese class conflict. In short, when the central government feels in control of a story, it tolerates, and sometimes even encourages, criticism and public comment. When confronted by surprise, however, Beijing can be much less tolerant.

Chinese media politics are in part so complicated because the Chinese Party/state is “a hodgepodge of disparate actors” (O’Brien & Li, 2006, p. 66), and tensions between China’s central and local governments, especially in media relations, are well documented (Stern & O’Brien, forthcoming). Journalists sent to report on local problems by powerful, central-level agencies like *People’s Daily* and the Xinhua news agency are sometimes harassed, expelled, or even beaten (Interview by author, March 12, 2008). Because central officials often have a difficult time monitoring the behavior of local governments, the Internet can serve as one of the few tools Beijing can rely upon to obtain information from the periphery (see Lorentzen (2006) for more on these dynamics).

### **Safety valve**

Blogs seem to function best as a safety valve when newspapers have already set the agenda of the discussion. For example, rising oil prices have caused economic hardship in China and elsewhere, and are a prime contributor to China’s rising costs of food and energy (Peel, 2011). Mindful of the economic effects of high fuel prices, the Chinese government continues to subsidize domestic oil companies and maintains strict price controls, but these efforts have not halted the rise in prices. With the increasing Chinese embrace of the automobile, such price increases have the potential to be socially disruptive, yet bloggers remain free to harshly criticize CCP energy policy. A blogger who calls herself “v3219,” for example, laments the Chinese oil oligopoly’s huge profits, wonders whether state subsidies are “for good or for evil,” and urges the state economic planning commission to act or else be seen as a “young girl talking nothing but nonsense” (*zhishi gu wangshuo*) (v3219, 2011).

Similarly, discussion of even relatively sensitive issues is acceptable online if newspapers have already set the agenda. This difference in coverage persists despite the fact that bloggers tend to be much harsher than journalists. The blogs examined in this study, for example, employed about 10% fewer positive emotion words per post and more than twice as many negative emotion words as contemporaneous

newspaper articles. When Shanghai Party boss Chen Liangyu was arrested in 2007 on corruption charges, the bold *Caijing* was the only newspaper that printed a story not relying on official Xinhua copy. Other papers did their own investigations and were set to release the results, but the powerful Central Publicity Department ultimately blocked publication (Interview by author, March 31, 2008). However online commentary over the event flourished. The most intense online coverage took place in the days immediately following the arrest, but bloggers continued to discuss it for months afterwards (Zhou, 2009). And compared to newspapers' uniform praise, one scholar writes, "bloggers on NetEase," one of China's largest Internet portal sites, "made comments on the event from more diverse perspectives, such as political disputes and inside stories about power struggles . . . problems of institutions and systems, individual quality of officials, and others"—all politically sensitive topics (Zhou, 2009, p. 1016).

Sometimes central authorities encourage online criticism to achieve a desired policy goal. In March 2007 journalist Zhong Xiaoyong, blogging under the penname Lian Yue, started warning his readers about the dangers of a proposed paraxylene (PX) chemical factory in the large southern city of Xiamen. Although local authorities tried to crack down on negative information, as many as 20,000 people showed up to protest the project (Economy, 2007), which was ultimately moved away from the city in what one Chinese newspaper called a "milestone" (*lichengbei*) that "set a precedent of solving problems through normal channels" (Xiao, 2007). Even official mouthpiece *People's Daily* claimed the result demonstrated the government's desire to "respect the will of the people" and reflected the central government's continuing efforts to fight local environmental problems (Zhu & Jiang, 2007). Although newspapers do not seem to set the agenda for environmental issues, the central government's concerted effort to push "green" reforms (see Stern, 2009) represents an overt expression of support that is likely to put bloggers at ease. This case also brings the intricate links between Chinese blogging and journalism into especially sharp relief, as Zhong Xiaoyong was "A well-known columnist for several leading commercial papers," who had "formerly worked as an editor for *Southern Weekend* and *21st Century Economic Herald*" (Qian & Bandurski, 2011, p. 67).

### **Pressure cooker**

Farmers' complaints and artists' protests, by contrast, are often dealt with harshly. Chinese social scholars have pointed to several rural "mass incidents" that led to large-scale protests and violent clashes with police (Yu & Yu, 2008). In each case events occurred suddenly and quickly escalated into conflict. There appeared to be no organizers and instead protesters were drawn together through the Internet. The most important trigger in these cases was an unresponsive local government that allowed small grievances to escalate into large-scale protests (Yu & Yu, 2008).

In part, the harsh response to complaints over China's agricultural issues may reflect the Party/state's (and news media's) increasing tendency to favor the interests of capitalists rather than farmers or laborers. Although the government has made

some effort to help rural families in recent years, income inequality continues to grow, and China has one of the world's highest rural suicide rates (Xie, 2007). When a damning report on the plight of China's farmers was published in 2004 (Chen & Wu, 2004), the government moved to quickly ban distribution on the grounds that the book was too sensitive. And given the low purchasing power, education rates, and newspaper access of China's rural citizens, it is hardly surprising that newspapers are often reluctant to cover their problems. Indeed, when there *is* coverage, it is often positive, even triumphalist, in tone.

A similar dynamic is sometimes at work with the urban proletariat. In 2004, workers in a Chongqing factory unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the sale of their employer to a lowball bidder by going on strike. Unlike earlier cases that had garnered substantial media attention, however, this case attracted little attention in either the mainstream media or on the Internet, in spite of the fact that journalists had been provided written materials at a seminar just days earlier. The reason, Zhao (2008, p. 313) asserts, is that the media are "often guilty of the same superficial, manipulated and one-sided research and analysis that have contributed to a policy-formation process detrimental to the interests of workers." Worse, the news media "are the main channels of propaganda for government officials and factory managers, and they play a major role in amplifying neoliberal reform ideas" (Zhao, 2008, p. 313). This case ultimately led to a violent confrontation requiring 1,200 police to suppress, hardly helping local social and political stability. Although this particular strike did not concern agricultural issues, the same dynamic keeps many newspapers from noticing problems in the countryside until bloggers bring them to mainstream attention.

Art is another seemingly uncontroversial topic that has sometimes provoked a surprisingly harsh state reaction. The detention of internationally prominent artist Ai Weiwei signaled just how seriously China's central government considers "wayward" artists. Ai's arrest was hardly the only such example; writer and poet Liao Yiwu was barred from leaving the country to attend the 2011 Sydney Writer's Festival (Bradsher, 2011), artist Cheng Li was jailed for his provocative sex-themed art (Keating, 2011), artist Guo Gai was arrested just days after Cheng (Keating, 2011), and the list goes on.<sup>10</sup> Some of these arrests were likely related to official nervousness over online calls to overthrow the CCP in a "jasmine revolution," but the Party/state has been ambivalent about art and artists since the 1949 Communist takeover.<sup>11</sup> Given the mainstream media's relatively low levels of art coverage and the fact that bloggers set the agenda in this area, it is no surprise that art bloggers seem to make the CCP uncomfortable and arguably serve as a pressure cooker that increases China's social tensions.

## Conclusion

Rather than simply being a "safety valve" that reduces bloggers' anger over political or social problems, or a pressure cooker that increases these tensions, the results of this study suggested a more nuanced perspective in which the Chinese blogosphere can act as either, depending on the topic. In some domains, the CCP seems comfortable allowing bloggers free reign to comment on, or even castigate, official actions. This

applies to issues where the agenda is set by the mainstream media, such as coverage of corruption, energy issues, and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute, or by the central government, such as environmental protection. This willingness to allow criticism has two facets: First, the central government is eager to use Internet commentary to monitor and control the actions of otherwise unaccountable local officials, and second, the CCP's tight grip over the mainstream media seems to make officials more comfortable with having newspapers "guide" the Internet than vice versa.

This is not to say that the Chinese state remains unaffected by the commentary of even tolerated bloggers. The exercise of state power and online activism have both become more sophisticated and now drive each other in a reciprocal process (Yang, 2009). On issues where the CCP feels it retains the upper hand, Chinese blogs can act as a safety valve in reducing and channeling social tensions.

When they get ahead of the official agenda or push into areas where the CCP is wary, however, bloggers create a pressure cooker effect that increases social tensions. On issues where the central government is ambivalent or unwilling to allow extensive mainstream discussion, including agricultural/rural issues, the arts, and religious coverage, the blogosphere can serve as a potent force for spreading sensitive information, gaining international media attention, or even coordinating domestic protests. Given the CCP's long-standing pattern of reacting strongly to problems that catch the leadership unawares, it is perhaps no surprise that bloggers in these areas seem more likely to increase, rather than reduce, social tensions.<sup>12</sup> Bloggers who "make their own news" and act ahead of the mainstream media arguably include more radical voices than those willing to follow the cues of Chinese newspapers and television. As these issue entrepreneurs move forward, they are likely to face increased censorship and state scrutiny, sometimes causing the very frustration that encourages offline action. It is understandable that blogs increase tensions mainly on issues the CCP is comfortable managing, but it is ultimately the few out in front who create the greatest political and social change.

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## Notes

- 1 This timeline was determined by data availability, as newspaper articles from later in the year (and, oddly, sometimes earlier as well) had not yet populated the database.
- 2 Without access to Google's proprietary blog search algorithms, there is no way to know what form the selection bias might take. The fact that I was searching blogs by date and unsorted by blog popularity should help offset any potential bias.

- 3 In November and December 2010 this site was available at [http://blogsearch.google.com/blogsearch/advanced\\_blog\\_search](http://blogsearch.google.com/blogsearch/advanced_blog_search), but this functionality seems to have been disabled as of October 3, 2011.
- 4 Note that it is possible that a few posts from overseas Chinese were included as well, but these will be only a small portion of the total and should not affect the results.
- 5 The database is similar to the Lexis/Nexis aggregator, and papers include Anhui province's *Anhui Ribao*; Beijing's *Huaxia Shibao*, *Jiefangjun Bao*, *Renmin Ribao*, *Zhongguo Jingji Shibao*, *Zhongguo Jingying Bao*, and *Zhonghua Gongshang Shibao*; Chongqing's *Chongqing Ribao*; Fujian's *Fujian Ribao*; Guangdong's *Nanfang Zhoumo* and *Guangzhou Ribao*; Jiangsu's *Jiangsu Jingji Bao* and *Xinhua Ribao*; Shanghai's *Jiefang Ribao*, *Lianhe Shibao* and *Wenhui Bao*; Shanxi's *Shanxi Ribao*; Sichuan's *Sichuan Zhengxie Bao*; and Yunnan's *Yunnan Ribao*.
- 6 This site is no longer online, but other segmenters are freely available elsewhere.
- 7 Full list of terms in Chinese and translation available from the author.
- 8 Thanks to Will Lowe and Alistair Iain Johnston for providing this list.
- 9 Full ARIMA models and replication data available from the author.
- 10 See <http://chinageeks.org/2011/03/perspective/> for a partial list.
- 11 The 1957 "Hundred Flowers" campaign and its aftermath is a particularly good example of this ambivalence.
- 12 Such as the official reaction to the awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to dissident Liu Xiaobo, a reaction that many observers saw as all out of proportion to the event itself.

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## 安全阀还是压力锅？博客在中国政治生活中的作用

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### 【摘要：】

尽管有审查的存在，中国的博客依然经常揭露腐败，帮助解决社会问题，甚至对国家官员施加压力来改变政策。网上舆论的力量在个别情况下是无可争议的，但博客的话语在中国政治生活中的整体效果尚不清楚。博客是通过让闹事者在边缘媒体发泄不满为政治变革减轻压力，还是通过与中国更大的政治传播系统结合来鼓动政治行动和建设志同道合的活动家社区？本文通过使用大规模的内容分析和具体案例研究，认为博客不仅是讨论主流媒体设置议程的议题的“安全阀”，也是博客先于记者报道的问题的“压力锅”。

## Soupape de sûreté ou autocuseur? Les blogues dans la vie politique chinoise

Jonathan Hassid

Malgré la censure, il arrive fréquemment que les blogueurs chinois dévoilent la corruption, aident à résoudre des problèmes sociaux et font même pression sur les représentants de l'État pour qu'ils changent les politiques. Le pouvoir de l'opinion en ligne est incontesté dans les cas individuels, mais l'effet global du discours des blogues sur la vie politique chinoise n'est toujours pas clair. Les blogues allègent-ils la pression en faveur d'un changement social, en permettant aux fauteurs de trouble de se décharger de leurs frustrations dans un média marginal, ou sont-ils intégrés dans le système plus large de la communication politique en Chine, inspirant ainsi l'activisme politique et créant des communautés d'activistes du même avis? Par une analyse de contenu à grande échelle et des études de cas spécifiques, je soutiens que les blogues servent de « soupape de sûreté » à propos d'enjeux lorsque les médias principaux gèrent l'ordre du jour, et d'« autocuseur » sur les enjeux pour lesquels les blogueurs devancent les journalistes.

Mots clés : politique chinoise, blogues, mise à l'ordre du jour, médias chinois, changement social

## Sicherheitsventil oder Druckkocher? Blogs im chinesischen politischen Leben

Trotz Zensur entlarven chinesische Blogger regelmäßig Korruption, helfen soziale Probleme zu lösen und setzen Regierungsoffizielle sogar unter Druck, ihre Politik zu verändern. Die Macht der Online-Meinung ist für individuelle Fälle unbestritten, die generelle Wirkung von Blog-Diskursen auf das chinesische politische Leben ist allerdings unklar. Bauen Blogs Druck für politischen Wandel ab, indem sie Unruhestiftern Raum geben, ihrem Unmut in randständigen Medien Luft zu machen oder sind sie in ein größeres System politischer Kommunikation in China integriert und inspirieren politischen Aktivismus und bilden Communitys von gleichgesinnten Aktivisten? Mittels umfassender Inhaltsanalyse und spezifischen Fallstudien, argumentiere ich, dass Blogs dann als „Sicherheitsventil“ für Themen dienen, wenn Mainstream-Medien die Agenda setzen und „Druckkocher“ für Themen sind, bei denen Blogger den Journalisten voraus sind.

Schlüsselbegriffe: chinesische Politik, Blogs, Agenda Setting, chinesische Medien, soziale Medien

## 안전밸브 또는 압력밥솥: 중국인들의 정치적 생활에서의 블로그

Jonathan Hassid

### 요약

검열에도 불구하고 중국 블러거들은 주기적으로 부패를 폭로하고, 사회적 문제 해결을 돕고, 그리고 정부 관리들이 정책을 바꾸도록 압력을 행사한다. 온라인 여론의 힘은 개인적인 상황에서는 논란의 여지가 없으나 중국의 정치적 생활에서의 블로그 담론의 전체적 효과는 아직 분명하지 않다. 블러거들이 문제가 있는 정치인들을 소규모 미디어에 노출하는 것에 의해 정치적 변화를 위한 압력을 행사하는지, 아니면 대규모 정치 커뮤니케이션의 시스템과 통합하는 것에 의해 이를 시행하는지 등이 잘 알려져 있지 않다. 대규모 내용분석과 특정한 사례연구들을 통하여, 본 논문은 블러거들은 주류 미디어들이 아젠다를 형성하는데 있어 안전 밸브 역할을 하고 있으며, 블러거들이 언론인들보다 먼저 점유하는 이슈들에 대해서는 압력밥솥의 역할을 하고 있다고 주장하고 있다.

# Una Válvula de Seguridad o una Olla a Presión? Los Blogs en la Vida Política de China

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## Resumen

A pesar de la censura, los blogueros Chinos descubren corrupción en forma rutinaria, ayudan a resolver problemas sociales, y aún presionan a los oficiales del estado para cambiar políticas. El poder de la opinión online es indisputable en casos individuales, pero el efecto general del discurso del blog en la vida política de China no es claro. Alivianan los blogs la presión para el cambio político permitiendo que los alborotadores ventilen sus frustraciones en los medios marginales, o están integrados dentro de un sistema mayor de comunicación política en China, inspirando el activismo político y la construcción de comunidades de otros activistas afines? Usando un análisis de contenido de larga escala y estudios de caso específicos, arguyo que los blogs sirven como una “válvula de seguridad” sobre asuntos donde los medios dominantes establecen la agenda, y como una “olla a presión” sobre los asuntos donde los blogueros se adelantan a los periodistas.