
Articles

The emerging practices of Chinese web journalism during the Beijing Olympics: A textual comparison with Western news sites

ABSTRACT

When the Beijing Olympics opened in July 2008, it was described by commentators as the first online games. The moment of the Games therefore presents an opportunity to compare the way web-based news is being produced by leading news organisations in different parts of the world and therefore to reflect on how far China's rapidly-growing web-based news practice is following Western practices and how far it operates by distinctive dynamics. A genre analysis of major online news outlets shows that quite distinctive journalistic logics were deployed in Chinese reporting, as a result of a mix of local factors. The article points to some characteristics of the emerging textual news practices. It also emphasises the need to develop this kind of analysis further so that Chinese web journalism can be understood in terms that are less reliant on those developed to analyse Anglo-American news websites.

Keywords: digital media, international news, multimedia, news values, online media

JING XIN and DONALD MATHESON

Wuhan University and University of Canterbury

WHEN THE Beijing Olympics opened in July 2008, it was described by commentators as the first online games. For the first time, both the International Olympic Committee and media

organisations spent considerable resources on web-based media, including streaming video, up-to-the-minute results and multimedia features. This innovative coverage and high investment were apparent both in the West and in the host country itself, China. The moment of the Games therefore presents an opportunity to compare the way web-based news is being produced by leading news organisations in different parts of the world and therefore to reflect on how far China's rapidly-growing, web-based news practice is following Western practices and how far it operates by distinctive dynamics.

On the basis of a genre analysis of that coverage, we argue that there were indeed quite distinctive journalistic logics in evidence in the Chinese reporting. We suggest that while the same fundamental 'media logics' (Dahlgren, 1996) of web-based news, particularly the use of frequent updating, interactive features, hypertext and multimedia, were drawn on by Anglo-American and Chinese editors alike, they were deployed differently, as a result of a mix of local factors. The article points to some characteristics of the emerging textual news practices. It also emphasises the need to develop this kind of analysis further so that Chinese web journalism can be understood in terms that are less reliant on those developed to analyse Anglo-American news websites.

It is clear, from a brief glance at an example, how different the news coverage in China and the West was. On Wednesday, 13 August 2008, the US news site NBC.com contained a single news item about swimmer Michael Phelps—a crafted overview of his prodigious training diet written by a specialist reporter of NBC. The text gathered together material from a range of sources, including quotations from a broadcast interview given by Phelps. Anglo-American professional notions of the application of editorial judgment clearly governed its production. On the same day, the Chinese Sina.com provided a plethora of shorter news texts on the same story. These stories usually focused on one element about Phelps, though they often overlapped. Were it to be seen in Western terms, the coverage would be described as extravagant and disorganised. We argue here it would be better to regard the coverage as operating within distinctive journalistic notions—indeed ones that would be unacceptable at NBC. These include a pronounced emphasis on the latest news, a strategy of abundance in which users are provided with a vast amount of material in a wide range of different media and a desire to include and involve netizens in the news event. Across the range of online textual practices, from immediacy and interactivity to the use of hypertext and multimedia, Chinese web journalism appeared distinctive to the industry leaders in the West.

These features of Chinese web journalism are not yet well described in the academic literature, let alone accounted for. Much of the English-language literature concentrates on questions of control by the state of traditional and emergent forms of media. Much of the literature is also old: as Kluver and Yang (2005) show, academic interest on this topic peaked in 2000, with 34 separate papers in that year, and then dropped significantly. While research on a range of aspects of journalism in China is increasing again, we found little to help us in producing this study. All this against a backdrop of exponential growth in the use of the internet within China, including for news purposes. By 31 December 2010, the semi-official CNNIC calculated there were 457 million netizens in China, of whom 77.2 percent were online news users (CNNIC, 2011). Overall mainland Chinese comprise about 20 percent of the world's internet users (IWS, 2011). Studying the distinctive ways in which Chinese web journalism is evolving is clearly worthy of attention.

The case study: 2008 Beijing Olympics

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was the first Olympic Games to have a wide variety of digital coverage available on the web around the globe, with hundreds of millions of viewers able to follow the action on an extensive range of digital media platforms. In previous Olympics, websites tended to be less up-to-date than television and were restricted by broadcast rights deals, as well as the audience's capacity to access video online. Sites had been restricted largely to reproducing textual and highlights of video material that originated in other media. The 2008 Olympic Games, however, marked a milestone in the rise to prominence of digital media. For the first time, a large amount of live and on-demand video was available to domestic sports fans via the internet. In the US, NBC reported an average of 4.3 million unique users a day during the Games on its Olympic website (Nielsen, 2008a). In China, more than 217 million Chinese internet users accessed Olympic-related content during the event and an average of 62 million unique visitors viewed Olympic content each day (Nielsen, 2008b). Because coverage of the event was not primarily shaped by cost considerations, because it was planned and because much was at stake for news providers in terms of prestige and audience share, it provides a good case to explore how the opportunities of the web were embraced for gathering and presenting news.

Literature on analysing web-based news texts

Most large news websites around the world reproduce news originally produced for other media, with little news produced only for the web. As a result, a major tradition in the analysis of web-based news concerns itself with differences in the presentation and circulation of these texts, what can be termed the textual practices of this medium. In an early paper, Dahlgren (1996) proposed that the ‘media logic’ of the internet turned the same news texts into a different kind of knowledge. Users now had access both to the most immediate news and to deep archives of information, to opportunities to customise and to interact with texts. As studies, mostly on US and European news sites, accumulated since the mid-1990s, a consensus emerged that a few key aspects of web-based news texts merited particular attention. Among these were immediacy, interactivity, hypertext and multimedia. However, as the following discussion of each of these categories notes, the textual news practices that result in any particular context cannot be in any sense ‘read off’ the affordances of the medium. That is, without close attention to the particularities of the Chinese context, there is a risk that this study might read Chinese web-based media in terms of categories that are only a loose fit. Therefore, we need to separate out the media logic, or the technological affordance of the medium, and the journalistic logics that actualise them. As Bucy (2004) notes, ‘unless a medium’s technological affordances are recognised and understood by users, they will remain unutilised’. The article is structured according to these four major logics or affordances and how they are used by journalists differently within the Western and Chinese contexts in covering the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Some major themes that emerge from the Western scholarly literature are discussed first under each of these logics below, before the framework is used to study the texts.

Immediacy

A fundamental aspect of the relationship between news producers and audiences is the timeliness of news. News is a recent account of public events, and more recent news often increases greatly in news value. Hence the affordance online to update the news with little effort or cost has attracted considerable scholarly attention. The absence of deadlines—or, rather, the continuous deadline—online has been widely remarked on as a major distinctive feature of news websites, that has significantly affected how the news is produced and consumed. The implications of this intensified

immediacy of the news are complex. To some critics in the West, a ‘news cyclone’ (Klinenberg, 2005) has resulted in which the news cycle has accelerated so much that key journalistic values such as facticity and quality of public debate suffer. Boczkowski and de Santos (Boczkowski & Santos, 2007) in Argentina discern a logic towards homogeneity of the news at key moments in the day, as competing news organisations match each other’s updates in an intensification of journalism’s pack mentality. Quandt (Quandt 2008) in Germany finds greater reliance on news agency and public relations material as the speed of updating exceeds that of the ability of reporters to produce fresh news. It has become clear that greater immediacy has effects far beyond an acceleration of news production, but leads to the intensification of certain aspects of news practice rather than others. In China, there is little empirical evidence to suggest what greater immediacy means for news practice. For example, the intense competition between news portals at a moment such as the Olympics may encourage a homogenisation logic, yet on the other hand the enormous amount of news produced by the country’s 700,000 media workers may encourage diversity.

Interactivity

Interactivity has been the single most studied aspect of web journalism, with scholars agreeing it presents a significant challenge to dominant conceptualisations of the relationship of journalism with its audiences. Research has tended to distinguish between medium interactivity (also known as user-to-system or content interactivity) and human interactivity (also known as user-to-user interactivity). It is, however, important to conceptualise interactivity not simply as a collective of features or activities, but as the textual traces of the relationship between those taking part in mediated communication (see Matheson 2005). This conceptualisation has value for the study of information sharing and collaborative structures on the web, often described as Web 2.0, in which multiple aspects of these relationships change at once.

The pace at which Web 2.0 features and content are being integrated into news sites—from email links, social bookmarking tags, RSS feeds and Twitter to blogs, wikis and social networking—suggests that the competitive pressures are forcing news organisations to respond quickly to changes in how users interact with news online. Purcell et al. (2010) find that news use in the US is quickly becoming focused through portable devices, through customisation feeds and through various modes of media sharing.

In addition, there are accounts of news sites drawing on playful devices designed to arouse interest, which respond to ‘a media landscape [that] presents itself as a play-space to be mastered by the individual’ (Worsfold, 2007). Yet at the same time, Western journalism scholars note a tension as practitioners talk of interacting with audiences while doing little in practice to give up their position as authoritative arbiters of public debate (Domingo, 2008). The impact of more participatory forms and the emergence of smaller, niche audiences on the quality of that debate is also widely debated (see Morozov, 2011). These multiple tensions mean that the relationships arising from users’ interaction with the news online are far from stable. Research on the Chinese internet (e.g. Giese & Mueller, 2010) indicates quite distinctive ways in which Chinese netizens interact with each other and with texts, based on their ethical, political and cultural values, raising questions about how far the changes there mirror those being traced in Western scholarship.

Hypertextuality

Hypertextuality emerged early as the key textual mechanism through which material on the web could form into ‘an extended chain of integrated content’ (Oblak, 2005, p. 93). While the metaphor of networks has become useful in recent years to describe the production of meaning online (see Gane & Beer 2008), the term hypertext continues to be important as a descriptor of the detailed textual practice. Three specific textual practices emerge in the online journalism literature, namely hyperlinking to provide context, the production of non-linear texts and the commercially-driven reluctance to link externally.

To take these in turn, firstly Pavlik (2001, p. 23) argued early for the use of hyperlinks as part of a shift of journalistic practice from a condensed-news approach to a more ‘contextualised journalism’. Deuze (1999), too, spoke of a key emerging task of online journalists as ‘providing information about information’, so that users could reach various kinds of related information, ranging from archives, backgrounds, original documents, to multiple perspectives on a particular topic. Through hyperlinking, completeness and context emerge as key aims of newswriting. Secondly, a widely-adopted strategy in the past decade has been to present texts on a similar topic in a hierarchy that allows users to ‘drill down’ from news headlines to full accounts and then in-depth analyses, and industry data in the US suggests users use this strategy much of the time in consuming the news (Mortensen 2011). To some extent, Western online news has embraced a non-linear mode of news presentation,

although practice is a long way from expectations that the classical inverted pyramid news texts would disappear. In a Norwegian and US case study Steensen (2009) finds the development of online news genres a slow and contradictory process of change. Thirdly, these changes have been heavily commercially-influenced in most Western news. The capacities to increase the transparency of news by providing links to original documents and to widen users' horizons are rarely implemented. Instead most links are within news sites, and indeed Tremayne (2006) finds this trend intensified as online news organisations' archives grow over time. The uniqueness of the Chinese online news market and internet users' profiles raise the possibility that expectations about hypertextuality might be culturally-specific to the West, and therefore require testing in Chinese contexts.

Multimediality

The term "multimediality" usually refers to the integration of more than one medium or media formats. Much literature on multimedia is inclined to demonstrate how multimedia employs multiple senses and multiple channels of storytelling. Fagerjord (2003) uses 'rhetorical convergence' to describe the coming together of different kinds of news presentation in modern online journalism, through means such as texts, photographs, flash animations and video.

A vast body of literature underscores the prominent role of multimedia within web journalism. First of all, multimedia journalism online plays an important role in attention-attraction and 'smooth navigation'. In the face of the steadily-increasing speed of news and information circulation in society, multimedia journalism appears to be an effective way to engage viewers and to prevent audiences getting lost in the sea of information. The multimedia content can immediately engage users with the news coverage, since entertainment and journalism, emotion and information have been wrapped up in the same package (Väliaho & Lundgren, 2005). Many researchers in the West find that the web does not favour long texts and thus an essential aspect of online journalism is navigation. Thus, while non-linear storytelling is rare, the development of two-storey news texts has been identified (Väliaho & Lundgren 2005) in which short texts, photos, audio and video attract viewers, often on an emotional level, and then longer texts and perhaps more relevant photos and videos give interested readers detailed information. Mostly drawn from the experience of media practice in the West, the prevailing literature

on the merit of multimodality suggests that it might play a significant role in attention-grabbing and promoting smooth navigation. Whether audiences in the East share these needs and expectations is a question that has, again, rarely been asked.

Methodology

This paper takes a genre-based approach to comparing the textual practices of web-based news in the West and in China. That is, it studies these four affordances of the web for news within the holistic category of the emerging genres of news online, looking at a bundle of aspects of texts, including contents, forms, purposes, functionalities and the overall communicative interaction. A specific genre is usually named and recognized by members of the culture in which it is found, and therefore the approach lends itself to identifying commonalities or contrasts across cultural boundaries. The primary concern of this study emerges as the task of characterizing typical characteristics of the given genre—web news. Ihlström's (2004) summary of content, form, functionality, purpose and positioning offers helpful analytical aspects in defining characteristics of different web news genres. However, it should be clarified that the model is applied indirectly here, as a useful analytic in general terms, rather than as a specific list of features. One more noteworthy merit of the genre approach lies in its power to integrate various contextual factors in a networked context. As long as we retain the arena of communication as a dynamic process, we must recognize that the performance of the digital genre is an ongoing process of negotiation in the socio-cultural contexts as well as in the relevant area of specialisation. More precisely, genre analysis is applied to identify contextual meanings of genres and position them within their social and cultural circumstances. How the mainstream web news genre defines, organises and finally communicates with various social realities is the underlying concern.

In seeking to identify the dominant web news genres in the Western and Chinese contexts, we identified websites to study by two criteria: 1) their status as 'quality' professional news outlets; and 2) their popularity and size. Six sites were chosen from Western media and six from China, so as to facilitate comparison (Table 1). The Western sites were studied largely as a unit, on the assumption that British and New Zealand sites¹ would generally follow the lead of the innovation and cultural dominance of the United States, but also to expand the scope of cultural comparison.

Table 1: Chinese, Western websites: cultural comparison

Chinese sites	Western sites
News sections of four web portals:	The New York Times (www.nytimes.com)
Sina (news.sina.com.cn)	NBC news (www.nbc.com/News_and_Sports)
Sohu (news.sohu.com)	The Guardian (www.guardian.co.uk)
Netease (news.163.com)	BBC news (www.newsbbc.com)
QQ (news.qq.com)	New Zealand Herald (www.nzherald.co.nz)
Xinhua News Agency's online counterpart, Xinhua (www.xinhuanet.com)	Television New Zealand (www.tvnz.co.nz)
China Central Television's news website, CCTV (www.cctv.com)	

Note: Sites studied in this research.

The comparison between Chinese and English-language websites was possible because of the focus on issues of genre rather than details of language. English-language sites from China were available, but were not used because they were regarded as not typical of Chinese practice. Similarly, news portals were included in the Chinese material but not in the Western material, because of the dominant position in Chinese web journalism of the news services of these web search and social media providers.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is twofold:

1. To identify key elements that constitute the mainstream web news genre in Western and Chinese news texts on the Olympics and thus to explore distinctive features of Chinese web journalism;
2. To explain the contextual implications of mainstream web news genres and position the genre within social-cultural circumstances and relevant specialized areas.

The general research design is qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual. The study examines, for each of the chosen sites, the in-depth news sections on the Beijing Olympics, between 8 August and 24 August 2008.

Analysis and findings

Immediacy

From the outset it is clear that the Chinese news sites studied here engage with the possibilities of immediacy in a quite different way to their Western counterparts. The texts produced are very short and each contains what Western news producers might consider as one element of a story. Detailed

descriptions of events, introductions to schedules and stories on each participating team can be found. Large numbers of these texts are uploaded into themed sections on different aspects of the Olympics or on particular star athletes, each date stamped as the latest news on that aspect as the Games unfold. A very strong 'episodic news frame' (Iyengar, 1991) is in clear evidence as the news providers, led by the portal sites, pursue values of immediacy and timeliness in their coverage. For example, though all the Chinese websites analysed had live text reports on the opening ceremony, every step of the ceremony was also reported as breaking news. At 19:59 on 8 August, almost every Chinese website issued a one-sentence breaking-news item: 'The opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics (formally) begins.' Then the commencement of each stage of fireworks, each performance, each team's parade, and other moments was treated as a breaking news story. For the opening ceremony alone, there were hundreds of news pieces on each Chinese website. In addition, instead of replacing old stories, the editors of these sites accumulated more news items, leading to a dramatically-higher number of stories at the Chinese sites.

The Western sites largely reproduced longer print or news agency items. Timeliness seemed not as urgent an issue, with updating far less frequent. News articles at Western sites often synthesised various events and background information into a single piece of news. The BBC for example summed up the opening ceremony in a single piece of news, 'Games begin with spectacular show'. This 850-word report covers a wide variety of events, such as the pyrotechnics, performance, and parade, as well as a handful of key figures, including Li Ning who lit the Olympic cauldron, the President of the IOC, the Chinese President, both British and Chinese flag bearers and the director of the opening ceremony. Each dimension, or more precisely, each paragraph in this article was usually made into a separate news story at Chinese websites. Moreover, the BBC article also mentions aspects beyond the opening ceremony, such as the possible first medalists in the UK and China, as well as American swimming star Michael Phelps' goal of eight Olympic golds. The *New York Times*' news story for the opening ceremony, 'China's leaders try to impress and reassure world', is the longest we found. The approximately 1500-word article indeed says less about the opening ceremony itself, but more on the impact of the Olympics on Chinese society, including issues such as national pride, the boost to the economy, diplomatic strategy and the theme of the harmonious society. In addition, the site only date-stamped its

stories, with no specific time of uploading, revealing its continued reliance on newspaper traditions and routines.

Clearly, different logics apply to these contexts—indeed, the Chinese sites follow practices that we are not aware of elsewhere in the world. It is likely that the news portals, with a magpie-like practice of accumulating material, have led the practice there. CCTV and Xinhuanet, whose news practice in print and broadcast is quite different, follow the portals' approach online. The intense competition between the various sites appears to have manifested itself in a display of both immediacy and plenitude. Being the first to issue the report appears to be regarded as of the utmost importance. The Western news logic of a fresh 'wrap' each day is replaced by a constant flow of material. Individual news items offer little context and are far from comprehensive, but offer depth and breadth of coverage through their accumulation. The findings on the Western coverage echoes research by Barnhurst and Mutz (1997, p. 27) that reporting has shifted to 'deemphasise events in favor of news analysis' (p. 27) or, in Iyengar's (1991) terms, a thematic treatment of news. Barnhurst's (2002) observation also applies, that US newspapers on the internet 'do not appear to reinvent themselves online' and 'the web versions reproduce the substance of their print editions in a way that relates similarly to readers' (2002). He attributes the minimal change of the online version as a monopoly strategy of guarding their market position and erecting 'a barrier to the entry of geographical competitors and ideological alternatives in the US news arena' (p. 477). Thus competition reveals itself in different ways in the coverage.

Interactivity

A corollary of the abundance of small texts in the Chinese coverage is that the opportunities for users to interact with the web sites differed significantly from the Western sites. There was a vast amount of choice, much of it overlapping and repeating material. On the front pages of the Olympics sections of each Chinese site were various forms of news (in texts, pictures, audio, video or multimedia), commentaries (such as blogs or forums), tabular information (such as statistics or traffic reports), search engines (whether by date, results, disciplines, athletes, venues or keyword, and internal or external), archives (daily archives of the Beijing Olympics, archives of previous Games, gold medals only, results only), and entertainment devices (including mini-games and wallpapers). However, though the number of options was impressive, the nature and relevance of the choice reflects an emphasis

on the quantity rather than the quality of the interactive options, perhaps reflecting trade literature that equates maximising user choice with a high level of interactivity. The Chinese news websites were very crowded. In contrast, Western websites offered a comparatively small number of content choices; there was rarely any repetition; and the content tended to be not as sensational and attention-grabbing as in the Chinese content.

In terms of medium interactivity options, Chinese websites provided fewer choices than the Western websites under study. The majority of the Chinese websites offered four choices (search engines, archive, adjusting the text and mobile version), while the majority of Western websites offered six choices (search engines, printable versions, participation in social websites, RSS, archive and mobile versions). Search engines, archives and mobile versions were widely used by all of the websites studied here. We would note that the Chinese websites paid particular attention to the option of adjusting the text, while they showed little interest in offering links to a printable version, which was standard among the Western websites. The general lack of a printable version is probably related to the fact that the printer is not prevalent within Chinese households, while a great majority of Chinese netizens surf online at home. Very few Chinese websites put customisation devices, such as RSS, registering to receive news updates, at users' fingertips, as most Western websites did. Relevant here might be the different cultural values operating in the two contexts—particularly individualism vs. collectivism. In the West, there are worries of information overload, which combines with an assumption of individualism, emphasising the unique entity of each person. The popularity of 'Daily Me' services alike seems to be closely related to such an individualist cultural value. Chinese culture prioritises collectivism, which calls for a favouring of state or group interests over individual interests and desires (Triandis et al., 1988). Busy web pages with a large number of choices might be able to facilitate users seeing what everyone else reads.

In terms of human interactivity, the Chinese websites tended to be more enthusiastic than Western websites in facilitating human communication. Compared with their Western counterparts, the online chat rooms, Olympic blogs and discussion forums at Chinese websites were larger in size and more diverse in content. Taking the Olympic blog as an example, one can find generally four kinds of blogs in the six Chinese Olympics sections: athlete blogs, celebrity blogs, journalist blogs and netizen blogs. Though not positioned

on top as often as athlete or celebrity blogs, the ordinary netizen's blog was highlighted by the sites at times. Moreover, blogs written by volunteers, ceremony performers, on-site viewers and other netizens were often quoted in Chinese mainstream news coverage, both online and offline. Such a practice is in sharp contrast to the Western practice that overwhelmingly emphasised professional journalists' blogs. In addition, podcasting was applied in completely different ways in China and the West. Chinese websites emphasised amateur contributions to podcasts, whereas Western websites underscored the convenience of podcasts to listen to or to watch professionally-made content. Despite the widening academic discussion of Twitter, all of the mainstream websites studied here were conservative in employing Twitter, although that is likely to have changed since.

The interaction between user and text is clearly likely to differ by culture, and the findings above accord with research that suggests Chinese netizens use the internet in ways not predicted by Western experience (Giese & Mueller 2010). News providers there are clearly responding to cultural expectations towards more collectivist modes of consuming news. The implications for journalism are harder to discern, with some not entirely successful experimentation with a cornucopia of opportunities for interaction combined with different ideas of journalism. Two main points emerge. Firstly, it appears that, in contrast to their Western counterparts, Chinese web editors were concerned with encouraging a large quantity of interaction while Western editors favoured a restricted range of interactions over which they had editorial control. In the Chinese portal sites in particular, there was a heavy emphasis on human-interest stories to both draw viewers into the site and to involve them actively in collective projects. One of the most heated soft news items in China during the 2008 Olympics was about the shooting champion Guo Wenjun. The coverage of Guo's personal suffering at losing contact with her father reached a pitch immediately after she gained the gold. Evoked by the touching news coverage—'Winning a gold medal could be the most effective "Missing Persons" notice'—some 100,000 internet users participated in the 'search mission'. Active web reports, together with the enthusiastic help of netizens, meant many private secrets that embarrassed both Guo and her family were dug out. Secondly, Chinese editors were apparently less concerned about maintaining editorial control over user-generated content. The enthusiasm for drawing in netizens is again likely to be a function of the leading role that

portal sites play in Chinese web journalism, which all already provided blog platforms, email and chat facilities. In this context, the journalistic logics of interactivity differed significantly from Western models.

Hypertextuality

The all-inclusive logic again dominates the Chinese online journalistic practice on the use of hypertexts and hyperlinks. The study here finds that the front page of the Olympic sections at the Chinese websites had far more internal hyperlinks than their Western counterparts. Table 2 provides an approximate count for the last day of the Games.

Table 2: Chinese, Western media: Comparison of internal hyperlinks

Western sites	Internal hyperlinks	Chinese sites	Internal hyperlinks
New York Times	72	Xinhuanet	712
Guardian	83	CCTV	326
NZ Herald	93	Sohu	851
NBC	55	Sina	1027
BBC	139	Tencent (QQ)	309
TVNZ	37	NetEase	663

Note: Approximate number of internal hyperlinks at the front page of Olympic sections of media websites, 24 August 2008

The numerous hyperlinks at Chinese sites generally played an active role of ‘providing information about information’ (Deuze, 1999). Confirming Fredin’s (1997) supposition, the practice of Chinese journalistic professionals becomes less one of selection and more one of providing the widest possible range of information. Links to various forms of news, commentaries, information, search engines, archives and entertainment devices crowd the front page of Olympic sections in the six Chinese websites studied. In contrast, Western websites value elite content and tend to have ‘a deliberate reduction’ of the number of news pieces, as Quandt (2008) noticed.

Moreover, Chinese websites valued news variation more than news depth. No doubt driven by the tactic of promotion, hyperlinks at Chinese news web pages often took the viewer further through the site, rather than deeper into the story. In contrast, Western websites followed the logic of ‘drilling down’ that equips viewers with a selection of related headlines to reach into the news in ever greater depth. Furthermore, the use of both hyperlinks and hypertexts in the Chinese sites contributed to a blurring of the line between editorial and

commercial content in Chinese web news. News websites took advantage of hyper-linking to promote their sponsors, embed advertisements, and infuse various commercial elements. A heavy emphasis on the commercial, the popular and the participatory, that might be termed a version of the ‘tabloid’ tradition, is in evidence, a point we return to in the conclusion. The Western websites under study seemed to pay much more attention to maintaining a clear distinction between editorial and commercial materials.

Previous research emphasises the commercial factors leading to very little linking outside of news texts (e.g. Tremayne, 2005). All the sites here followed that logic. However, commercial drivers worked quite differently in the Western and Chinese contexts. While Western news providers sought to take users deeper into their sites, as noted above, Chinese ones sought continually to grab their attention. In addition, the existence of two Olympic Coverage Alliances³ in China shaped the use of hypertextuality in contradictory ways—forming on the one hand a contemporary, interconnected landscape among members in the same alliance and on the other an absolute disconnect between media of different alliances. Being the organ of the Chinese authorities, the websites of CCTV and Xinhuanet were granted premier resources and their unshakable status protected them from the intense competition. They had no links to other websites. All the other websites under analysis had links to them, as they are crucial news feeders in China. The internet’s potential was clearly negotiated in quite complex ways within the commercial structure and the state-controlled media system in China.

Multimediality

Close examination suggests that different journalistic logics prevail also in picture and video use. Chinese sites tended to be less selective and instead intensively pursued strategies of including all available material. Among the Chinese sites, Olympic pictures were treated as a separate category and each provider set up a separate easy-to-remember web address for Olympic images. The picture subsections at Chinese websites contained many more pictures/thumbnails than the Western subsections: at least double the 20-30 clickable galleries of most Western sites. The Chinese sites also favoured hierarchies of subcategories of images. For example, along with ‘pictures’, Sohu had ‘latest photos’, ‘features’, ‘gold moment’, ‘stars’, and ‘facial expressions’ in its photographs subsection. There was an intensive use of heavy and colourful top banners, large HD picture displays, and various stand-alone picture galleries.

Such tactics were not favoured among Western sites. Most preferred categorising photos by day. For example, slide shows were often entitled ‘Day 12 action’ (TVNZ), ‘Team GB on day 14’ (*Guardian*), and ‘Day 16: photos of the Games’ (NBC). Photographs were also more closely integrated with textual content. Thus, the BBC used the least number of images of all the sites, but did so in quite specific ways. One slideshow of 18 images, ‘How does Olympic ceremony compare?’, gathered photographs from previous Olympics openings, each with a detailed description, so as to illustrate the event’s history. TVNZ’s pictures were usually captioned with complete sentences often laced with humour, for example: ‘A start gun goes off to signal to the other sprinters that the race for silver behind Usain Bolt has begun’, ‘US President George W. Bush fulfils his childhood dream of being on the women’s beach volleyball team’. Such judgment-laden practice was not common at other Western sites, and TVNZ perhaps stands out in its need to pique audience interest in a Games in which New Zealanders only occasionally featured. However, together all the Western sites shared a high degree of editorial integration of images and text.

These approaches appeared to reflect a different status given to images. Among the Chinese sites, the quantity of images on a particular Olympic event revealed editorial decisions about its level of importance, as well as a desire to compel the audience’s attention. Among the Western sites, images were treated similarly to textual news, acting often as a second level to the story. An assumption that ‘images matter as a reflection of the world at large’ (Zelizer, 2005, p. 28) is in evidence, combined with a concern to use multimedia to guide audiences through the sea of information. Indeed, Chinese web journalism seemed much less concerned to guide users through that sea than on making the sea bigger by a heavy use of graphical content.

In terms of video content, the relatively ‘calm’ atmosphere of Olympic video reports in the West contrasted sharply with Chinese online media, where an ‘Olympic battle’ of video reports took place. Nine Chinese websites won rights to broadcast Olympic video online, offering a large amount of Olympic video coverage, in sharp contrast to the Western situation of usually one Olympic video provider online in each country. The overwhelmingly-competitive environment of the Chinese online industry could be predicted to lead to a quite distinctive landscape of audio-visual coverage of the 2008 Olympics. Indeed, there was a significant amount of web-generated video in addition to Games footage, particularly interview programmes, on Chinese websites. ‘Sohu Beijing Report’, ‘Tencent’s No.1 Studio’, ‘Sina’s Exclusive’,

'Netease Olympic interviews', 'Xinhua interviews' and 'CCTV's interviews with champions' were a few prominent instances. The interviewees included not only athletes and Olympic champions, but also experts, celebrities as well as netizens. Most of the web-only video displayed a 'YouTube' style that emphasised an informal atmosphere, relatively less edited material and a heavy orientation towards entertainment content. Sohu's interview with basketballer Yao Ming is a good example. The interview took place at Yao's new apartment in Beijing, which was under construction. The following is a snippet of the dialogue between the interviewer Zhang (chief executive of Sohu) and the interviewee Yao:

Y: Sorry about the mess. We've just moved in.... Wanna drink of water?

Z: No, thanks.

Y: Wanna drink of Mao Tai [a well-known brand of Chinese alcohol]

Z: OK.

Y: Really?

Z: Yes.

In the video, the two participants chat and drink before sitting down to a relatively interview-like conversation on a couch. A cable installer was occasionally shown on screen, as he was busy working during the entire interview. This video style differs from the Western journalistic logic, at least in the mainstream sites studied here, that values high quality video content and sees the YouTube style as a trait of user-generated content. Of course, a possible underlying reason for the Chinese websites employing the YouTube approach was the shortage of time, equipment and video professionals. With the exception of CCTV.com, all the Chinese websites studied here did not have strong resources in broadcasting. Nevertheless, the effect of a blurring of professional and citizen modes of video is significant.

The study finds little web-generated video content in the West. The websites of the three Western broadcasting rights-holders studied here, namely NBC.com, the BBC.com and TVNZ.co.nz, heavily relied on their television footage. Shovelware and repurposing video content were the most common strategies for producing video content at the three TV-affiliated websites. The other three Western websites, NYT.com, Guardian.co.uk and NZHerald.co.nz created limited video coverage, mostly relying on their journalists in Beijing to provide video reports.

Bolter and Grusin (1999) contend that ‘remediation is a defining characteristic of new digital media’, which they define as ‘the representation of one medium in another’ (p. 45). Though the digital medium ‘can try to refashion the older medium or media entirely’ (p. 46), it is, they say, important to note that ‘every act of remediation...ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced’ and ‘the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways’ (p. 47). The remediation of existing cultural forms followed quite different paths in Chinese and Western sites, with the former drawing less on news precedents for their multimedia. CCTV.com, QQ, Sina, and Xinhuanet all produced video online that remediated the traditional storytelling art of Pingshu,⁴ a form that had appeared to the younger generation as somewhat old-fashioned. Three of the sites (CCTV, QQ and Sina) reproduced a series of ‘Olympic Pingshu’ produced by China Education television, and Xinhuanet created its own Pingshu programmes to discuss the Olympic Games. This highly distinctive genre of commentary deployed a quite different kind of convergence to Western mainstream web journalism. Rather than the traditional history-based Pingshu, the sites drew on Olympic news and netizen posts. By utilising humorous language, dramatic storylines, and vivid descriptions, Pingshu performers explained behind-the-scenes stories, top news topics during the Olympics, connections between various Olympic news stories, as well as historical contexts for particular sports games in an engaging and distinctive way. In a context of national pride and self-consciousness surrounding the Olympics, it sought to combine tradition and modernity.

Conclusion

The Olympics was a highly distinctive moment in Chinese news media, and the journalistic logics discussed here must be seen within that context. Two points stand out. Firstly, the 2008 Olympic Games witnessed a steep rise in original news reporting among the four Chinese web portals, owing to the opening up of Chinese state rules on the accreditation of journalists during the Olympics. There was a huge amount of original news and features among the Chinese web portals. We have found no research detailing the amount of web-generated news or the proportion of portals’ original reporting during the 2008 Olympics, nevertheless it was apparent that key news stories, such as gold medal moments, the breaking of records and opening and closing ceremonies were given intensive, independent coverage by each web portal.

Indeed, there is some evidence of the ‘shovelware’ phenomenon operating in reverse, with traditional media in China republishing original coverage from the news portals. The Games represent a significant moment in the development of online news in China. Secondly, there was a tendency towards sensational and attention-grabbing reporting in online reporting. The web portals in particular were accused by one commentator of being ‘intoxicated with champions’ private lives’ during the Olympics (Zhang, 2008). A news headline at NetEase about an Australian gold medalist read: ‘Although gay, he gains respect’. A Chinese champion with a beautiful wife was reported on as much for his romance as for his sporting activities, and all the Chinese news sites posted pictures of her. Gold medal Chinese diver Guo Jingjing’s relationship with a wealthy Hong Kong man was also heavily reported.

The journalistic logics discussed above therefore emerged in a quite particular competitive news environment. The plethora of material available through the Olympic media alliances combined with a competitive demand for original content that would set each site apart, leading to the phenomena described above of sites that were full to the point of being confusing with the most immediate, richly multimedia and interactive content. Chinese web journalism broadened enormously at this moment, under competitive pressures.

Yet we would also emphasise that these developments cannot simply be read as the result of competition, for the responses to competition in Chinese web journalism have been quite different from those in the West. Nor can they be read simply in terms of the Chinese political environment, as has been common in Western research in Chinese media. This project shows that a wide range of contributing factors, from the highly competitive market to the hierarchical media system, from social and cultural conventions to the unique profile of internet users in the country, have shaped the distinctive features of Chinese mainstream web journalism. An approach that considers China’s distinctiveness in terms just of one of these features will overly constrain scholarly understanding.

In addition, the study shows the need to extend the Western critical vocabulary in order to adequately study Chinese journalism practice. The study finds, for example, that mainstream Chinese news sites are less likely than Western ones to use medium interactivity features, while more likely to employ human interactivity features. Thus scholars should be cautious of studies that make conclusions about interactivity from studying aspects such as the use

of hyperlinks or search functions. This point is likely to have broader applicability across East Asian cultures—Cho and Cheon (2003), for example, find a Korean newspaper they studied was less interactive than US newspapers in this respect. Yet interactivity may manifest itself in different ways in these cultures. Hong et al.'s (2008) proposed 'active-and-inactive' model may work better for these media. After comparing a Korean online newspaper with an American one, they conclude: 'Korean online newspapers are more actively involved in networking or maintaining online users' relationships using active interactivity content such as discussion forums, chat rooms and communities' (p. 509). This study finds a similar trend.

Consequently, we would seek to describe and explain the practices of the Chinese sites studied here in terms of emerging journalistic logics, rather than rely upon assumptions that work in the Western context. For example, an observation that multimedia serves to guide users through the sea of information describes the Western web journalism we studied here, but is not as readily applicable to our Chinese material. At Chinese websites the emphasis is often on making the 'sea' bigger through heavy use of multimedia content.

In a broader sense, then, this study contributes to the de-Westernisation of global communication studies, a correction of what Alatas (2006) calls the marginal position of Asian and other non-Western scholarship (p. 105). This study too suggests that the categories and findings of Western online journalism research must be systematically re-examined in order to study the Chinese case. We need a greater assertiveness and determination to develop theoretical frameworks and paradigms that take consideration of the cultural context. Gunaratne (2010) suggests that a productive research project of this kind 'does not mean the elimination of the corpus of work' that has been produced by both Western and non-Western scholars; rather, it means 'the addition of multiple approaches to investigate problems in their proper context, so that factors such as culture, environment, ideology and power are not omitted from the theoretical framework or held to be constant' (p. 474). We agree and have sought to follow Kluver's (2011) invitation to shift the focus in research on China from how it is changed by the internet to how it, with its enormous population of netizens and growing web-based media, is changing the internet. Much more research is needed on web-based journalism in China outside particular moments such as the Olympics, but it appears that China has much to tell the rest of the world about how news industries can make use of the possibilities of the internet.

Notes

1. The lead author conducted her doctoral research in New Zealand, making sites from that country a practical addition to the study.
2. Excluding ads links, navigational icons, and popular news rankings, all other hyperlinks were counted. These figures are estimates, because of the difficulty of counting links in highly busy websites, such as the Chinese portal sites. The contrast between Chinese and Western numbers nevertheless is clear.
3. In response to Sohu's claim of certain exclusive rights at the 2008 Olympics, online rivals, including Sina, QQ, and Netease formed an Olympic Coverage Alliance against Sohu. In addition to web-based media, this alliance comprised television stations, radio stations and print media as well. Sohu also formed a similar alliance within a short time, featuring a media team that incorporated both traditional media and web-based media in China.

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Dr Jing Xin is a post-doctoral researcher at Wuhan University, China, where she teaches multimedia journalism and is conducting comparative research on Western and Chinese journalism practices. She completed her doctoral thesis at the University of Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2010.
 cynthiajx@hotmail.com

Dr Donald Matheson is a senior lecturer in media and communication at the University of Canterbury. He is the author of two books, Media Discourses (Open Univ Press, 2005) and Digital War Reporting (Polity Press, 2009, with Stuart Allan). He is the co-editor of Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics, and writes on journalism practice, particularly from a discourse analytic point of view, and with a focus on online journalism and journalism ethics.
 donald.matheson@canterbury.ac.nz