

15th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

Day 1, April 4, 2014: Afternoon Session – 3:30-4:15 p.m.
***Pushing the Frontier of Journalism in China:
The Digital and Global Challenges***

Chair: Glenn Frankel, Director and Professor at **The School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin**

Keynote Speaker: Ying Chan, Director and Professor at **The University of Hong King Journalism and Media Studies Centre**

Q & A: Glenn Frankel and Ying Chan

Ying Chan: I'm thrilled to be here. I heard about the conference—that this is the best journalism conference in the world. And I confess that it took me a long time to come here, but it's great to be here. And I enjoyed it very much. So, that's my title. And first, I want to introduce to this man, Chinese XI Jinping. He looks a little like big brother watching you. But after all, he took charge of a new cybersecurity group that was created last year, and he took over in February. And this just shows the importance that the Chinese leadership plays on the internet.

Now, when this was setup, and even here in the report, it said that this about cybersecurity: "It is about cyber war." Those are the exact words they said. But I guess people worried, because, you know, managing the internet. What's the Chinese government going to do? And we were especially worried because under XI Jinping, since he took over a year ago [and] also doubled as the President of the country, of the government, we've seen an unprecedented crackdown of the internet and of free speech in the past year. Now there was online rumor rules was enacted. Weibo once was very robust. It's often compared to as the Chinese version of Twitter, but actually Weibo is more robust than Twitter. But Weibo has been silenced in the main. There were a lot of arrests for speech crimes, news sites were blocked, and the government has taken a very tough line on foreign correspondents and is threatening them with refusing to give them the visa. Because under the current arrangements, they have to apply for their journalist visa every year. So, there was a lot of panic towards the end of last year. Most of them get their visas eventually. Only a couple were not allowed to, because they're journalists.

So, just to give you some example of the censorship that's going on. Now, in the past couple of weeks, there's been massive protests against a chemical plant in Maoming, a city in Northwest Guangdong, in the southwest, in China's southwest. It's a small city with five-million population in the metro area. And this is one of the pictures of the protest. People were very much

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open in the public. This picture is taken from Sina Weibo, but it's blocked. And if you search on the Weibo, Maoming PX, the name of the town, you will see this in Chinese that, "According to relevant laws and policies, the results are not shown." And this is quite typical.

And then at the university in my department, this is one research we're doing that we go behind the Weibo using the API to collect the Weibo, the entries, that were deleted. You use a time link and then you have entries that were there at one time and then later that's deleted. And this is what's deleted. And you have someone post on the Weibo, said, "Please share information. The media is not allowed to distribute information." And it's deleted at this time, but before it was deleted, it was retweeted at least 147 time. The message is getting out. Right? At least 147 reposting has gone out.

And there's another example to show you that's a part of our research. This is original, the picture that was posted. It was posted at 13:29 hours, and it was deleted at 14:22, in about an hour's time, but an hour is a lot of time. A lot of information can get out. But this is what's happening.

Now, the government also passed a law.... Not passed a law, by the way. It's the Supreme Court issued an interpretation of the standing regulation to say that if you spread rumors on the internet, you are liable to criminal prosecution. If it's been read 5,000 times or if it was reposted 500 times, you're liable to be put in jail for three years. But it was interesting that this cartoon was put up there by Xinhua, the state news agency. [On] the tongue, the four characters there basically said, "Internet rumor. You're not supposed to have rumor on the internet." And hundreds are targeted in online blitz, and there were people that were arrested. And this is supposed to be the scene of parents telling or educating the children to immune them against rumor.

So this, you see the 500 was there. So, it turned out that the first man -- actually he's a teenager. He became the first person to be arrested. He was left at home. He loved to play on the internet. Teenagers [are] very smart. He was arrested for posting so-called rumor on the internet. And that raised a storm of protest around the country, and then he was released, or he could be put in jail for three years.

So, I can give you more example, but you got the idea. And then, plus, there's a lot of hazards of reporting, putting together information. And this is the New York Times who did this story on the wealth of the relatives of former Premier Wen Jiabao. Let's see, it was blocked once the story was printed. One of the findings of.... Let's see, yes, I have it here. One of the findings of the investigative report was that you have—does this work—yes, yes—his 90-year-old mother somehow has his shares in a state-owned insurance firm valued at 120-million U.S. dollars. And so, these are all his relatives who have some kind of wealth. There's no allegation of his misdeeds, but this is the picture of the family. And some of them, we call

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them princelings. And so, the New York Times site has been blocked until now. And the site was also blocked soon after the New York Times launched its Chinese site. And that's still being blocked. Mike Forsythe is one of the reporters at that time, and he said, "All the stories are documented."

Now, what it means is that I'm bringing up this New York Times story [because] that is a game changer in reporting about China. Yes, we know that, we suspect that, or we know that the princelings are involved in wealth. There may be corruption, *but* the difference is that it is documented, and documented and used available documents. What it means as China becomes more open, as it becomes -- adopting capitalist ways, there's certain logic in it, because you have you more documents. You have company registrations. You have company reports. If you got listed on the stock market in Hong Kong or in New York, you have to file reports and more information become available.

For instance, this is the website of the Beijing Company registration. You can actually go there to search for information. So it means that there's also progress. And this is another website by the Beijing Municipal Government, where you can go there and look. And their resumes are posted, histories of companies posted, land registration, land purchases information there. This is another website. It's by the Supreme Court, Peoples Court, where you also have court documents.

So, there's a contradiction with the government. On one hand, they want to control information. On the other hand, the logic is that more information is available for reporters. And so not only international reporters, not only the foreign media has been looking into these documents. Chinese newspapers have been using these documents to look for the money in the classic sense of following the basic principle of investigative journalism, of good journalism of follow the money. Who has what? Who owns what? So, this is he's drawing the map of the land issues in Beijing. So, this is happening.

But there's also events quite disturbing. Peter Humphrey, he was a former Reuter's reporter who set up his own due diligence firm in Shanghai. He was arrested. He and his Chinese wife were arrested last July. He's still in jail. Now, he was charged with compilation, purchasing, and other methods to illegally acquire and sell large amount of citizen's personal information. Now, the question, of course, is, when does investigative journalism end and due diligence begin and stealing information begin? So, there's no open hearing yet. And then he was paraded on state TV. Shown here admitting his crime, admitting that had done something wrong. This is a case that is very scary.

Now, there's another fallout from investigative reporting: reading the documents, finding, following the money. This is very American centric [*chuckles*] in the sense that for those people who follows China stories, who followed investigative reporting issues. The Bloomberg self-censorship killing of a story has captured -- has been in the news a lot in the past, oh, sense

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end of last year. Now, we know that when journalism became the news, it's not a good sign. Your journalists stay behind the news. When journalism journalists became the news, then something is not very right. Oopsie.

Here we have Ben Richardson, who together with three other Bloomberg reporters, spent eight months or six months doing an investigative story on a very rich man in China and his connections with the top government officials. The story was vetted by the lawyers. It was approved by senior editors. And when it was ready to go to press, the top editors in New York say, "No, it's not ready. Let's withhold it." And here is the chairman of Bloomberg, who two weeks ago in Hong Kong, admitted almost that the story was spite or withheld for fear of offending the Chinese government and because they have a terminal business in China. So, the worry being that if the story was run, then China would retaliate and it would hurt its terminal business. So, for the four journalists involved—two reporters, two editors—one was resigned and is now working for the New York Times, and Ben Richardson resigned a month ago, at the end of February or early March, kind of in protest. So, these are the hazards of reporting on China. Documents are there. More information available. *But* you do have all these odds against you.

Now, then, luckily we have the digital. We have online. As the numbers that Glen has mentioned in terms of the digital, in terms of internet, China, the numbers are huge. The numbers are huge. These are the numbers here, the number of internet users. 81% of them access the internet by mobile. Mobile here. They may not use the iPhone, but homegrown smartphones are cheap and affordable. They use instant messaging. Almost half of them use Weibo. And 355 million active WeChat users. I'm going into WeChat later. And they are also avid mobile phone owners. The latest number is 1.22 [billion] for a population of 1.4 billion. That means everyone has a phone, which means it's not untypical of developing [countries]. There are countries elsewhere, like Africa, or countries just opened up. The Chinese will leapfrog and jump to this digital world.

Now, this is the numbers to show the trend. You have 81% penetration. These are the numbers of.... 500-million is the number of internet users who access by mobile. And so, what it means is that the internet has created a tremendous space for journalists to express themselves, to share information, to collaborate among themselves or internationally.

And I'm going to give you one example of this reporter, whose name is Luo Changping. This is a clip taken from Time Magazine who call him the new corruption buster. Because Luo, this reporter, openly challenged a top official about his allegations of his stealing money from public coffer. And then because of his open challenge to this official, the government was forced to launch an investigation and got the top official, who is a top railroad official, arrested and charged and shamed. And so, Luo Changping made quite a lot

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of headlines when it happened. This is really unusual for a reporter to openly challenge a top official.

So I'm going to show -- this is a short clip I want to show you. This is Luo Changping. I'm going to play this, right? Please.

[Video plays of Luo Changping speaking in Chinese. The closed captioning in English is shown below as it is on the video.]

Then I discovered that as a journalist I could exert far more influence than being a writer. We know the smog is terrible in Beijing now. But worse than the real smog, is the political smog. Chinese tax-payers have no idea where their money goes. As media workers, we want to get out of this smog. Despite the intention of the government, the era of transparency has come. The right to technology opens up new chances for us. No one can stop us from moving forward. I believe transparency is critical for China. As is stopping the monopoly of information. We need to be able to see everything the government does and every deal it makes under the sun. This is the kind of transparency we are looking for.

■ **TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL**
the global coalition against corruption
www.transparency.org

Let's see. This clip was made by Transparency International when he was awarded -- named for his courage in exposing wrongs in government. The translations are good, except that there's a line [where] he said, "The access to technology has given us the truth." In Chinese, actually, a more appropriate translation would be, "Technology has empowered us. Technology has empowered us." It's very powerful lines. Why [does] he feels so empowered? He went to get his award from Transparency International. When he came back, he lost his job. And they didn't exactly fire him, but in a very classical, not so Chinese fashion, is that he was moved from their editorial department to a research department. So, he [was] removed from his post.

Now, but he was -- this is what he's doing now. So, but he kept writing on his Weibo platform, Weibo. He has two: one on Tencent Weibo, one on Sina Weibo, the two most popular. And on one Weibo, he has 710,000 followers. On the other one he has 396,000. Almost 400,000 followers. That means on these two platforms, he has almost a million followers. OK? Everything he writes to one million [people]. Not only that, he is publishing actually on four platforms. One is Baidu, another leading internet search company. It has a platform. He publishes there. Tencent Weibo, we saw it. WeChat, this is new, so he's also published there. Sina Weibo. So, with these four platforms,

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anything he writes potentially can reach 1.2-million readers. He doesn't need the newspaper. He still needs the newspaper, but can do things himself, thanks to the internet. 1.2-million.

And now we come to WeChat. I said earlier that Weibo is kind of dying, quieter. Not so much die, but because of the government crackdown, they have taken -- the government has taken down those who have most followers. Right. Those influential writers on Weibo. Now, but then, there's WeChat. And actually WeChat give me one reason to get a nice iPhone. I think it's a 5s here. It's my excuse. What WeChat does is, unlike Weibo which is on the web, web centric, this is mobile centric. This is mobile. You can subscribe to it and information will be pushed to you. And this are Luo Changping's, our reporter friend's personal channels. So, he can set up his own channel and can write and publish.

WeChat also has very good analytics. And this figure shows that every day, on this day, which is March 7th, he [had] 89,000 -- almost 90,000 unique visitors went to his site, went to this here. And 3,000 went to the longer story, [went] in to read the story, and 7,000 reposted, retweeted the story. This is daily, every day. It has also figures on March 6th, if you can see it. On that day, actually he has more readers. He has 96,000 readers.

Now, and these are his pages that he posted on this little phone. And you can also sell ads on WeChat. These are his ads. I don't know how much he get paid for that, you know, but there's a business model for you here. There's another ad on education service. So, and then their marketing collective online to covering 600,000 subscribers.

OK. So, these are the numbers of WeChat: 355-million active users. It was launched in 2011. The growth is very fast. That's what we have now. So, what it means is that you have the internet has created tremendous space. There's a lot of potential. There are business models there, and a lot of room to explore and to conduct research. And it's like, I think, there's things from Chairman Mao.

The challenge is hard. The road is tortuous. But the future is bright, thanks to the internet. I think I'll stop here for our conversation.

[Applause.]

Glenn Frankel: So, we're going to pass the microphone around. I get the first question though. As you know, having spent more than two decades in the United States, we like to think of ourselves as the exporter of democracy and press freedoms and the benefits of capitalism. But what impact is Western media and Western corporations having on press freedom in China? On the one hand, you have the New York Times, as you showed us, you know, doing some really breakthrough, important stuff. On the other hand, you have the chairman of Bloomberg saying, just a couple of weeks ago,

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saying out loud in Hong Kong that, “While we wander a little bit away and write stories, we probably should have kind of rethought.” So, are we having a positive impact or a negative impact on press freedom?

Ying Chan: That’s very depressing. That’s very depressing. When I heard it, I literally felt chilling coming down my spine. The issue is that if an organization is powerful as the professional standards, you have to give into China. I mean, what about the little guys? Our young reporters, our reporters in Hong Kong, in China, what chance do they have? How can they stand up to power? So, it sends a very bad message.

Glenn Frankel: Who’s got a question?

Daniella Gerson: Hi. My name is Daniella Gerson. I’m with University of Southern California. And we’ve been working on a project that uses Weibo with the Alhambra police. Alhambra is a small city just east of Los Angeles. And it’s been fascinating to me the way it took off right away. We started an Ask an American Police Officer Campaign, partly to just do outreach locally, but it took off across China and also the United States. They are not at the scale of some of these Weibo accounts you showcased. But one question I had is, how come the Chinese government has been able to—as far as I understand—shut down Twitter to an extent that it cannot with Weibo? And what are the limits there, if you could explain a little bit?

Ying Chan: Well, Weibo is also under heavy censorship. Postings can be deleted by technical means, because you set it to filter out certain key words. You also have human monitors being posted at each of these internet companies. If they don’t do that, if they don’t censor properly, the companies can be in jeopardy. So, there’s a lot of self-censorship, self-policing going on. It’s under very tight control. But then what people did is that you race with time. You post and you have a little window and the messages get out.

Daniella Gerson: And if the Chinese government wanted to, could they shut down Weibo altogether? I mean, are they leaving it open intentionally to an extent?

Ying Chan: Well, there is also business proposition. Tencent is a listed company listed in Hong Kong. Actually, one-third of their shares is held by a South African internet company, Naspers. And we are in the age of globalization, so it’s very hard for them to shut it down totally.

Daniella Gerson: Thank you.

Woman: First, I do want to thank the volunteers for running up and down the stairs. I really appreciate it. And thank you so much. This has been a great discussion. My question was about, what constitutes a rumor according to the Chinese government? Because you’re saying they can imprison someone [or] put someone in jail for three years for sharing a rumor. Is that

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up to simply what the Chinese government determines constitutes a rumor? Can it be true? What's the qualification for that?

Ying Chan: Well, you said it, it's whatever the government says. All right? So, there's no such thing as what I believe to be true, and [it's not] all right to say, "I made a mistake." It's whatever the government says.

Glenn Frankel: That's the great thing about a police state. When you run it, you can make up the rules as you go along.

Man: So, these new digital tools, they give a lot of space to the journalists, but they also can turn into tools of surveillance by the state, right? So, we hear a lot about that in collection with the U.S., but the Chinese government has even fewer constraints in using the digital tools against these journalists.

Ying Chan: Absolutely. Absolutely. The government actually have armies of researchers, programmers studying all these. So, it's gaming. You're gaming each other, you know. So, what do you do? But there's space for you to express yourself, but there's also limits. There are certain things that are off limits. So, but it's a given. Government surveillance is a given.

Woman: Hi. Thank you so much for your speech. It was fascinating. I know that with journalists having to renew their visas annually, it creates a lot of anxiety. Foreign correspondents don't really know what the rules are or what the red lines are and yet they have to worry about them. So, if you were to make a list of don'ts, functionally, what is it that the Chinese government doesn't let you cover or will actually potentially penalize you for it? What are some of the cases you've seen of that nature?

Ying Chan: There are a number of don'ts, but I like to approach it in a more positive way. I say it's important that international medias or international civil societies need to somehow work together. Maybe tacitly. You do need to do the stories, right? And China is rich, too big to fail, and too rich to be offended. Everyone is a market, and so what do you do? But somehow the international civil society, media organizations, need to somehow coordinate or work together to advocate, to explain to the Chinese, and to continue to pursue the stories.

Man: Yes. Many of us in Africa, you know, fighting for civil liberties don't really know what to do with China. For one reason, many of our leaders say that China has succeeded economically, so why should we bother about Western democracy? So, is there any chance that the civil society in China will actually rise up to get the liberties that you need?

Ying Chan: Well, I think so. Civil society in China may not be rising up yet, but it is definitely growing. It is a very vibrant civil society bubbling beneath the surface. As to Africa, I think as journalists, let's do the stories. Let Chinese and African journalists work together and find out who are these

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companies, our Chinese companies, investing in Africa in the mines, building the dams? Chinese companies are building at least two dozen dams in Africa. Some are good. Some may not be so good. Some in the gray area. Let's do the story. Follow the money. I see there's a lot of need for international collaboration. And do the stories.

Man: I might take you up on that. Thanks.

Glenn Frankel: Someone way in the back.

Woman: Yes, thank you. [unintelligible name] You said that you are very optimistic about the internet and the internet is the future actually. So, my question is, do you think that the internet will be the most important tool to establish democracy? Thank you.

Ying Chan: Well, it's not just the internet. It's technology. I think that technology is empowering. It's liberating. It has its dark side. But for all kinds of reasons, it promotes democracy. It's an enabling platform for democracy. I'll put it this way.

Melody: Hi. My name is Melody. I'm with ACC's Accent Newspaper. I'm the Editor in Chief. I was wondering with as radical as the Chinese government is with pretty much anything involving journalism, it seems, do you ever have concerns for yourself? Just by the research that you do. Have you ever had concerns about that?

Ying Chan: For myself? Well, compared to journalists in China, I'm in a very good situation. I don't make things up. And so, I don't think it's an issue.

Glenn Frankel: Let me ask you, as someone who's founded two journalism schools, one on the mainland and now one in Hong Kong, Hong Kong is supposed to be a somewhat protected zone when it comes to press freedoms. Did you find that some of the things you can teach or put in the curriculum in Hong Kong you had to avoid or downplay in Shonto when you were putting that school together? Is there a difference?

Ying Chan: Yes, there are differences. Of course, there are some in Hong Kong, where this system called one country, two system. So, we don't have great firewall in Hong Kong. We have speech freedom and academic freedom in Hong Kong. But then in China, the young people are very smart, because they have access to information. Even with the great firewall in China, they are very skilled. They are very skilled. I learn from them. They use the VPN. They can access information. And this generation is the most informed and knowledgeable generation. So, you share knowledge with them as much as possible.