

# **Blogs and China Correspondence: How foreign correspondents covering China use blogs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent research shows that journalists read blogs much more than the general public. This paper hypothesizes that journalists with specialized beats use blogs more heavily than general reporters. A survey of foreign correspondents who cover China indicates that blogs are especially useful to this group. This paper analyzes why blogs are so useful to China correspondents and calls for more comparative research so that the relationship between blogs and international news can be better understood.

## Introduction

Weblogs began to have substantial impact on news stories in the United States and elsewhere in 2003 and 2004.<sup>1</sup> Since then, "blogs" have become the source of story ideas and information for growing numbers of journalists.<sup>2</sup> A recent large-scale survey of journalists conducted by Columbia Journalism School and Euro RSCG Magnet found that more than half of the journalists claimed to use blogs, and 70 percent of those who use weblogs do so for work. The survey concludes:

“...journalists are still struggling to define the role that blogs will play in the changing media landscape. ... While journalists cannot admit to trusting the information that blogs provide, they are still turning to this online tool in significant numbers, suggesting that journalists are cautious of bloggers and may be reluctant to acknowledge Weblogs as a legitimate source of information until the medium evolves further.”<sup>3</sup>

As a former foreign correspondent and bureau chief, China specialist, and close observer of the global blogosphere since 2003, it has been my observation that certain kinds of blogs with specialist knowledge – either about a specific subject or geographic region – tend to be most useful to journalists, especially those who cover specialized beats. When asked, many journalists now covering China say that they have incorporated blogs – both Chinese-language blogs written by Chinese people as well as English-language blogs written by various specialists based in China – into their regular media reading routine. One increasingly observes a story appearing first on a blog, then in a newspaper report or wire story several days later. There has been ample anecdotal evidence that foreign correspondents find blogs to be useful in their work, but no systematic data. Thus it seemed that an initial small-scale survey would be useful to determine how China correspondents approach blogs in the context of their work, and to pinpoint questions for further study and research.

There are now more than 400 foreign correspondents accredited officially to cover China, plus an unknown number who do so more informally. An online survey was completed by 72 journalists who cover China for a range of international news organizations, including many major U.S., UK, and European news media, reveals that blogs have become a staple of the China correspondent's media diet – and to a substantially greater degree than seems to be the case for journalists in general.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell, “The Power and Politics of Blogs,” paper presented at the 2004 American Political Science Association, available online at: <http://queensu.ca/politics/pols313/blogs.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2007);

<sup>2</sup> K. Daniel Glover, “The Rise of Blogs” *National Journal*, January 21, 2006, republished online at Daniel Glover's *Beltway Blogroll* blog: [http://beltwayblogroll.nationaljournal.com/archives/2006/01/the\\_rise\\_of\\_blo.php](http://beltwayblogroll.nationaljournal.com/archives/2006/01/the_rise_of_blo.php) (accessed January 4, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> “Rebuilding Trust: Rebuilding Credibility in the Newsroom and Boardroom,” A study by Euro RSCG Magnet with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, (EURO RSCG MAGNET, 2006), accessible at: <http://magnet.mediaroom.com/file.php/binaries/31/RebuildingTrust.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2007)

90 percent of China correspondents who answered the survey claim to follow blogs for their work. What's more, blogs were ranked in the middle on a scale of usefulness in comparison with a range of media sources. Respondents also tended to reject the idea that one can judge the "reliability" of blogs in general – and instead emphasized the need to evaluate the usefulness of each blog individually depending on the author's track record and reputation. Results also confirmed that certain English-language "bridge blogs" have become very influential with China correspondents.

This paper is divided into several sections. The first outlines the working conditions of foreign correspondents covering China, followed by one section describing the advent and growth of the Chinese blogosphere, and another explaining the phenomenon of English-language China-focused "bridge blogs." The final section details the results of a survey of 72 journalists who cover China for a range of international news organizations, including many of the major U.S., UK, and European media.

### **Foreign correspondents and Chinese media sources**

Between the 1949 Communist revolution and the late 1970's, very few journalists from non-Soviet Bloc countries had access to China. A few Western European and Japanese news bureaus were allowed to open in the early-mid 1970's, but until the U.S. and China normalized relations in 1979, the U.S. media's China coverage was conducted largely from the then-British colony of Hong Kong. The number of China-based foreign correspondents grew rapidly in the 1980's and 90's, and continues to grow in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Foreign journalists still operate in China under an array of restrictions and regulations: the coveted "J" visa for journalists is difficult to obtain. Properly accredited journalists are subject to a long list of rules that are applied inconsistently and arbitrarily. Most foreign correspondents are based in Beijing, with a much smaller but growing number in Shanghai. Official regulations have, until January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007, required that journalists obtain official permission before traveling to other cities and provinces.<sup>4</sup> This situation, combined with the fact that China is geographically as large as the United States, has made it difficult for a news organization with one or two correspondents based in Beijing or Shanghai to keep abreast of everything necessary to cover China.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>4</sup> This regulation was relaxed on January 1, 2007, although it remains unclear how the new policy will be implemented and what the long-term implications will be for journalist access in China. Benjamin Kang Lim and Ken Blanchard, "China sticks, in part, to vow on media freedom," Reuters, January 1, 2007, posted at: [http://in.today.reuters.com/news/newsArticle.aspx?type=worldNews&storyID=2007-01-01T111543Z\\_01\\_NOOTR\\_RTRJONC\\_0\\_India-281920-1.xml](http://in.today.reuters.com/news/newsArticle.aspx?type=worldNews&storyID=2007-01-01T111543Z_01_NOOTR_RTRJONC_0_India-281920-1.xml) (accessed January 3, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Most of this knowledge comes from the author's personal experience working in China as a journalist from 1992-2001, followed by frequent return trips. One of many accounts of life as a foreign correspondent in China is "Barry Petersen On Being A Foreign Correspondent In China," CBS News *Public Eye*, April 26, 2006, at:

monitoring of all available media sources is critical for foreign news organizations in their efforts to keep on top of events in such a vast, rapidly-changing, and geopolitically important country. Sources include the official Xinhua News Agency, official Chinese media, overseas news agencies and all other overseas media, overseas dissident websites, and all kinds of commercial and non-commercial Internet sources.

The job of China correspondent is even more difficult because the Chinese press is prevented by authorities from reporting many stories of unrest and disaster altogether. The situation is exacerbated by a Chinese government regulation forbidding Chinese nationals from working as bylined correspondents for foreign news organizations or from receiving official “foreign journalist” press credentials. Thus, all China correspondents are foreign nationals, and while a growing proportion do speak and read at least some Chinese the vast majority rely heavily on Chinese staff who are relegated by Chinese government regulation to support roles. Worse, Chinese staff of foreign news bureaus are on occasion tried and sentenced on charges of “revealing state secrets” or trumped up charges for other ostensible offences – a consequence of being overly helpful to their employers on politically sensitive stories.<sup>6</sup> All of these factors combine to make China one of the most challenging beats in the world. These factors also help to explain why the advent of the Internet in China – and the emergence by the late 1990’s of spaces where Chinese people endeavored to speak candidly if anonymously online – was a very welcome development to China correspondents.

By 2000, Internet chatrooms had grown sufficiently large and popular that foreign journalists, often encouraged by their local staff, began following and reporting on key discussions - especially during times of crisis and media crackdowns. Thus, for example, CNN cited Internet chatroom sentiment as one example of how parts of the Chinese public felt that the Chinese government had not taken a sufficiently hard line toward the U.S. during the 2001 “spyplane crisis.”<sup>7</sup> During the SARS outbreak, rumors swirling around Chinese chatrooms were constantly monitored by journalists; while information was not directly reported from the internet until and unless it could be independently verified, chatroom rumors were often cited as examples of misinformation floating around in absence of facts.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, on stories about events not witnessed by any

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<http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2006/04/26/publiceye/entry1548277.shtml> (accessed January 1, 2007); For an account of the research and reporting methods of the *Wall Street Journal* in China, see Peter Hessler’s *Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China’s Past and Present* (Harper Collins, 2006),

<sup>6</sup> The case of *New York Times* researcher Zhao Yan is only the latest example. See “China NY Times man loses appeal,” BBC News, December 1, 2006, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6197788.stm> (accessed January 1, 2007)

<sup>7</sup> For one example see: “To Many Chinese, Spy Plane Standoff Ended Too Soon” CNN Breaking News Transcript from live broadcast aired April 12, 2001 - 05:21 ET, at: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0104/12/bn.03.html> (accessed Jan. 1, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> For an example of how *TIME* magazine cited chatroom rumors in Hannah Beech, “How Bad Is It?” *TIME*, April 28, 2003, at: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/covers/501030505/story.html> (accessed Jan. 1, 2007)

foreign journalists whole articles have been based around comments from Chinese Internet chatrooms.<sup>9</sup>

### **The advent and growth of Chinese blogs**

The Chinese “blogosphere” grew from a mere handful of sites in 2002 to at least 20 million blogs by the end of 2006.<sup>10</sup> Due to Chinese government censorship and surveillance of the Chinese Internet, the nature of the Chinese blogosphere – and its relationship to government and media – is quite different than in the United States and other Western democracies. As in the West, the majority of Chinese blogs are highly personal and apolitical, most bloggers being young people who record their social lives, antics of their pets, etc. Unlike in the West, however, there is no political blogosphere on the other end.<sup>11</sup> Chinese blogs with the large readerships tend to be written by cultural celebrities and prominent entrepreneurs.<sup>12</sup>

Several categories of Chinese blogs are proving to be of use to China correspondents: A growing number of Chinese journalists are now blogging – some under their real names and some pseudonymously – providing a greater variety of information and analysis than they are able to do in their official news outlets. Some Chinese academics have begun to use blogs as a platform to discuss and publicize their research; educators are using blogs to share curriculum and communicate with students. Even more significantly, a few Chinese government officials at the local and even national level have begun to blog as a way to improve communication with their constituencies.<sup>13</sup> A courageous few – usually family members of people who have been arrested or detained and other victims of human rights abuses – have turned to blogs in order to publicize the human rights violations that they or their loved ones have experienced, and to appeal for justice.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For one such example see Ray Cheung and Vivien Cui, “China: Chat rooms abuzz with criticism of authorities' role in festival disaster,” *South China Morning Post*, Saturday, February 7, 2004, re-published at UCLA's *AsiaMedia* website:

<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=7393> (accessed Jan. 1, 2007)

<sup>10</sup> Agence France Presse, “China has nearly 20 million bloggers,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 7, 2006, at: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/web/china-has-nearly-20-million-bloggers/2006/12/07/1165081066793.html> (accessed January 1, 2007). This number however is in dispute. See: Stuart Corner, “Missing: 20 million Chinese bloggers” *ITWire*, December 11, 2006, at: <http://www.itwire.com.au/content/view/7947/53/> (accessed January 1, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon, “Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China” In Drezner, D., and H. Farrell, eds., WILL THE REVOLUTION BE BLOGGED? (Special Issue), *Public Choice*, Volume/Issue: (publication pending 2007). For an earlier draft posted online see: <http://rconversation.blogs.com/RMacKChinaBlogsREVISED.pdf> (accessed January 1, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Lu Qiu Luwei, “Chinese Blogs Have Unique Characteristics,” *Rose Garden* blog, December 6, 2006, at: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/m/luqiuluwei>; translated by Roland Soong on *EastSouthWestNorth*, December 8, 2006, at: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20061208\\_2.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20061208_2.htm)

<sup>13</sup> MacKinnon, *op cit*.

<sup>14</sup> One example of this is a blog written by Zeng Jinyan, who became a human rights activist after her husband Hu Jia, an activist on HIV-AIDS issues, was detained in early 2006. Her blog can be

With the exception of this final category of people who are willing to take substantial risks to speak out, Chinese bloggers rarely express overt political opinions. Many of the popular bloggers who write in a journalistic or literary vein for large audiences (i.e., thousands or more), engage instead in irony, parody, and innuendo, enabling informed readers to “read between the lines” about the blogger’s real point.<sup>15</sup>

### China’s “Bridge blogs”

The term “bridge blog,” was coined in 2004 to describe an emerging group of bloggers whose blogs act as “bridges” between their home country and a wider global audience. Early “bridge bloggers” included exiled Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan who in 2002 started blogging in English, summarizing what Iranian bloggers were writing in Persian.<sup>16</sup> The emergence of such bridge bloggers around the world inspired the creation of the website Global Voices Online (GlobalVoicesOnline.org), whose international team of bloggers provides a daily selection of the best “bridge blogging” from around the non-Western world.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most widely read English-language “bridge blogs” covering China is *EastSouthWestNorth* (widely referred to online by its acronym *ESWN*), written by the Hong Kong-based media researcher, Roland Soong.<sup>18</sup> It is worth describing his blog and his working methods in some detail as an illustration of classic bridge-blogging.

By the end of 2005 Soong’s blog was receiving 8,000 unique visitors per day. He had become influential enough in China-focused academic and media circles that several profiles have been written about him in the Western media.<sup>19</sup> Soong scours the Chinese-

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found on Microsoft’s blogging service at: <http://zengjinyan.spaces.live.com/> Another example is the blog of Nina Wu, sister of filmmaker Wu Hao who was detained for over five months without charge; at: <http://wuhaofamily.spaces.live.com/> (Both are blocked to Internet users in China unless proxy servers or other technologies that enable circumvention of Internet censorship are used.)

<sup>15</sup> Ashley Esraey and Xiao Qiang, “Under the Radar: Political Satire and Criticism of the State in the Chinese Blogosphere,” paper presented at the At The Fourth Chinese Internet Research Conference: China’s Internet and Chinese Culture. July 21-22, 2006, Singapore.

<sup>16</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, “Meet the Bridgebloggers: Who’s speaking and who’s listening in the International Blogosphere,” paper presented at “The Power and Political Science of Blogs” University of Chicago, September 16 – 17, 2005; Zack Pelta-Heller, “Building Blogs,” AlterNet, February 22, 2005, at: <http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/21316> (accessed January 2, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> *Global Voices Online* “About” page at: <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/top/about-global-voices/> (accessed January 2, 2007); Clark Boyd, “Global voices speak through blogs,” *BBC News*, April 6, 2005, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4414247.stm> (accessed January 2, 2007); “Found In Translation,” *Guardian Unlimited*, December 12, 2005 at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4414247.stm> (accessed January 2, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> *EastSouthWestNorth* is located at <http://www.zonaeuropa.com/weblog.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Justin West, “Between east and west,” *The Hong Kong Standard*, November 14, 2005, at: [http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news\\_detail.asp?pp\\_cat=11&art\\_id=5573&sid=5396554&con\\_ty](http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?pp_cat=11&art_id=5573&sid=5396554&con_ty)

language Internet for postings on Chinese-language blogs and chatrooms that might help outsiders understand what is happening in China, as well as articles in the Chinese-language media containing information and insights not readily available in English. His work on *ESWN* is purely voluntary. At the 2006 Chinese Internet Conference, Soong explained how he uses his blog to bridge between the “two different worlds” of English-language news and Chinese-language news. He pointed out that for many reasons, the English-language international media covers China in less detail than the Chinese-language media (including media from Hong Kong and Taiwan who report under much more free conditions). Much of the China news coming out in English is delayed, and Western journalists tend to have different perspectives on news events in China than Chinese journalists. His goal is not to replace the English-language mainstream media but rather to supplement it, and specifically: “(1) to make a difference in specific cases and (2) to create an awareness that things may be more complex than it seems.”<sup>20</sup>

Soong’s blog has provided the first English-language reports on a number of stories emerging from the Chinese Internet. Examples he cites include a 2005 bus explosion in the city of Fuzhou, evidence of which first appeared on the Chinese Internet thanks to cameraphone photos and messages from people on the scene; and a translation of the first report emerging on from the Chinese-language Internet via bystander text message that a British journalist and his local guide had been attacked by thugs on their way to a village beset by unrest.<sup>21</sup> In other cases Soong provided thorough documentation of events in China that the English-language media covered more superficially or sporadically, such as the long-running series of events surrounding local elections and efforts to recall the mayor of Taishi village, Guangzhou province.<sup>22</sup> Another story that Soong documented in detail was the lawsuit against two Chinese reporters by iPod subcontractor Foxconn (a Taiwanese company), and the outcry in the Chinese media that eventually caused Foxconn to withdraw its suit. Soong admits to have used his research and translation skills to “lobby, persuade and bully the western media to pick up the story.”<sup>23</sup>

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[pe=1](#) (accessed January 2, 2007); and John Ruwitch, “HK blogger fills East-West, North-South gaps,” Reuters March 1, 2006, as reprinted in *The Age* at:

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/breaking/hk-blogger-fills-eastwest-northsouth-gaps/2006/03/01/1141191725057.html> (accessed January 2, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Roland Soong, “Individual Blogging for Social Transformation,” paper presented at The Fourth Chinese Internet Research Conference, July 21-22, 2006, Singapore, online at: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060722\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060722_1.htm);

<sup>21</sup> Roland Soong, “The Taishi (China) Elections - Part 1 (Chronology),” *EastSouthWestNorth*, September 2005, at: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20050919\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20050919_1.htm) (accessed January 2, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Roland Soong, “Individual Blogging for Social Transformation,” *op cit*; Also see See Roland Soong, “The Taishi (China) Elections - Part 1 (Chronology),” *EastSouthWestNorth*, September 2005, at: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20050919\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20050919_1.htm) (accessed January 2, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Roland Soong, “FoxConn Coverage Update,” *EastSouthWestNorth*, August 29, 2006, at: <http://www.zonaeuropa.com/200608.brief.htm#108> (accessed January 2, 2007); “My Life As An Activist Journalist,” *EastSouthWestNorth*, August 31, 2006, at: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060831\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060831_1.htm) (accessed January 2, 2007).

In a blog post titled “Influencing Foreign Correspondents” Soong describes how his role differs from that of the conventional China correspondent:

EastSouthWestNorth is not a source of anything. You may ask that blogger for an 'expert' opinion (and he does not consider himself an expert in such matters), but he cannot verify any of the facts for you. EastSouthWestNorth was just a hotline tipster. Everything else is up to the foreign correspondent doing due diligence.<sup>24</sup>

A number of other China-focused “bridge blogs” have emerged over the past few years. (Many listed in the following survey section.) One that is also well-read by China correspondents is *Danwei*, launched in 2003 by the Beijing-based media consultant Jeremy Goldkorn and written by a small group of regular contributors – all Chinese-speaking Beijing-based expatriates – supplemented by occasional guest contributors including “journalists, scholars and people with expertise in Chinese business, media and culture.”<sup>25</sup> The *Danwei* team posts daily information about new developments in Chinese media and technology, and tends to be quite fast in reporting on new regulations, with links to the original text of the regulations when available.<sup>26</sup> Like *ESWN*, *Danwei* provides translations from Chinese media and blogs on subjects deemed to be of interest to the website’s readers.<sup>27</sup>

One example of how *ESWN* and *Danwei* have managed occasionally to lead international news coverage on certain stories is the case of a copyright suit by the Chinese newspaper *Beijing News* against the Hong Kong-based online news portal Tom.com. A story about the lawsuit first appeared in the Chinese newspaper *Southern Weekend* on December 21<sup>st</sup>. Roland Soong translated the story on *ESWN* on December 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>28</sup> *Danwei* then quoted from Soong's translation and added more analysis and links to further resources.<sup>29</sup> On January 3<sup>rd</sup>, the story was reported in the *International Herald Tribune*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Roland Soong, “Influencing Foreign Correspondents,” *EastSouthWestNorth*, September 15, 2006, at: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060915\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060915_1.htm) (accessed January 3, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> *Danwei* is located at <http://danwei.org/>; The “About” page listing contributors is at: <http://www.danwei.org/editorial/about.php>

<sup>26</sup> One recent example is Jeremy Goldkorn, “SARFT clamps down on “online TV stations,” *Danwei*, December 29, 2006 at: [http://www.danwei.org/media\\_regulation/sarft\\_clamps\\_down\\_on\\_online\\_tv.php](http://www.danwei.org/media_regulation/sarft_clamps_down_on_online_tv.php) (accessed January 3, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> A recent example is Joel Martinsen, “A fairy tale in Guangxi,” *Danwei*, December 31, 2006, at: [http://www.danwei.org/state\\_media/a\\_fairy\\_tale\\_in\\_guangxi.php](http://www.danwei.org/state_media/a_fairy_tale_in_guangxi.php) (accessed January 3, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Roland Soong, “Beijing News versus TOM.com,” *EastSouthWestNorth*, December 24, 2007, at: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20061224\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20061224_1.htm) (accessed January 4, 2007)

<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Goldkorn, “Republishing: protected by Chinese law?” *Danwei*, December 24, 2007 at [http://www.danwei.org/intellectual\\_property/republishing\\_protected\\_by\\_chin.php](http://www.danwei.org/intellectual_property/republishing_protected_by_chin.php) (accessed January 4, 2007)

<sup>30</sup> Howard W. French, “Copyright suit in China called opening salvo in media war,” *International Herald Tribune*, January 3, 2007, at: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/01/03/business/copyright.php?page=1> (accessed January 4, 2007).

## Journalist survey findings

An online survey was constructed in November 2006 and disseminated via e-mail to members of the Foreign Correspondents' clubs of Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing, publicized on my own blog and some other websites frequented by China correspondents, and sent to my own personal contacts among journalists who cover China. Between November 15 and December 11, 2006, 72 journalists who cover China took the time to complete at least part of a 30-question survey designed to gain a broader set of data on the extent to which blogs are impacting news coverage of China. Respondents included journalists from major news organizations (including Reuters, Associated Press, the *Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *Straits Times*, Al Jazeera, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, etc.) headquartered in the U.S., UK, Singapore, Russia, Qatar, Poland, Italy, Hong Kong, Germany, France, Finland, Canada, and Australia.<sup>31</sup> There are now more than 400 foreign correspondents accredited officially to cover China, plus an unknown number who do so more informally (i.e., those who report from China without official "journalist visas" or formal accreditation from the Chinese government).<sup>32</sup> The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China has a membership of roughly 160 people.<sup>33</sup> Thus while the survey sample is not huge, it does serve as a useful "focus group" for the evolving relationship between China bloggers and journalists who cover China for the international media (i.e., all news media except that of the PRC).<sup>34</sup> Key findings are as follows:

### **1. BLOGS ARE PART OF THE CHINA CORRESPONDENT'S MEDIA DIET. 90% of China correspondents surveyed follow blogs.**<sup>35</sup>

61 out of 68 respondents answered "yes" to the question: "For the purposes of work, do you or your staff ever read blogs written from or about China – either in Chinese or

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<sup>31</sup> The author confirmed that these respondents were in fact journalists covering China by requesting each respondent's name, organization, and e-mail address, with the guarantee that such identifying information would not be made public without the respondent's consent.

<sup>32</sup> According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry's official website, "Up to July 2005, there are altogether 245 media organizations and 425 correspondents from 44 countries operating and working in China." See: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/jzfw/3635/qy/t227085.htm> (accessed Jan. 1, 2007)

<sup>33</sup> Foreign Correspondents' Club of China website, at: [http://www.fccchina.org/what/club\\_info.html](http://www.fccchina.org/what/club_info.html) (accessed Jan. 1, 2007)

<sup>34</sup> For a summary of the full survey results as generated by SurveyMonkey (without access to confidential or identity-revealing information), see: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/DisplaySummary.asp?SID=2871727&U=287172715392>. Note that for the purposes of this paper, only results in which the respondent included a name and e-mail address were analyzed.

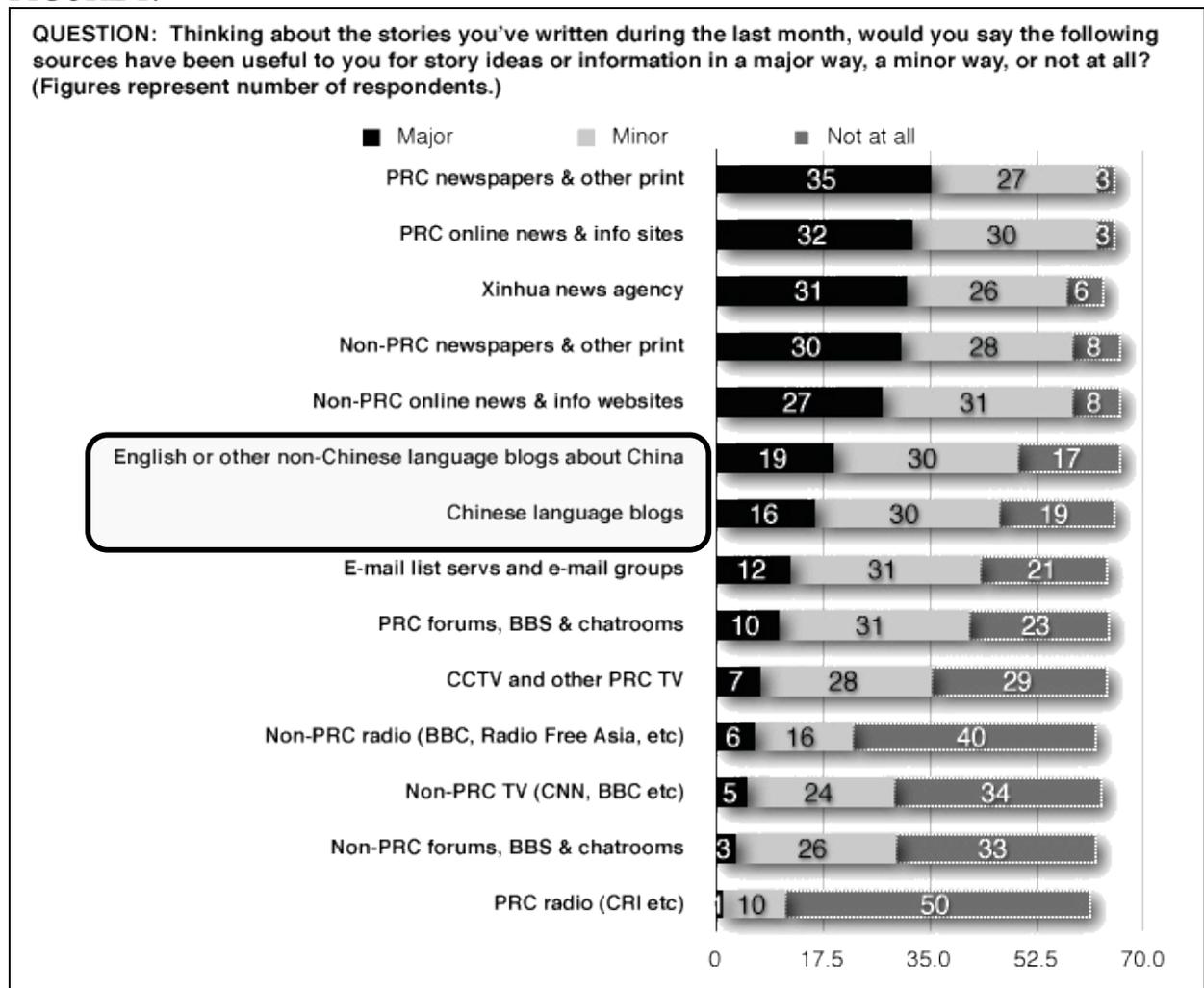
<sup>35</sup> Respondents were given the following definition: "A "blog" or "weblog" for the purposes of this survey is a form of easy online publishing. It is a kind of website, written by an individual or small group of individuals, usually in reverse-chronological order, regularly updated. The majority of blogs in the world right now are written by individuals who are not compensated for their writing, and who do not obtain permission from any authority or organization before publishing their own materials to the web."

another language?" In response to the question: "About how long have you been following blogs as a source of story ideas or information?" 41% said they have been following blogs for 1-2 years, and 22% have been doing so for two years or more. Nine people answered "never." These results indicate that blogs have become a media staple for journalists who cover China for major news organizations around the world.

**2. BLOGS VS. OTHER MEDIA. Most respondents find blogs useful for story ideas and information, and find blogs more useful than seven other categories of media sources.**

66 journalists responded to the question: "Thinking about the stories you've written during the last month, would you say the following sources have been useful to you for story ideas or information in a major way, a minor way, or not at all?" A range of options were provided, including Xinhua (China's official news agency), various People's Republic of China (PRC) and non-PRC news media genres (including online news), other online sources such as forums and e-mail list serves, as well as Chinese-language blogs and blogs written in other languages about China. (See Fig. 1 below for full breakdown.)

**FIGURE 1:**



“English or other non-Chinese language blogs about China” rated sixth in terms of “major” or “minor” usefulness. This was followed immediately by “Chinese language blogs.” Results showed that a majority of responding China correspondents not only find blogs to be useful for their stories, but that blogs are more useful to them than CCTV (Chinese Central Television), CNN, BBC (radio & TV), overseas forums, domestic forums and BBS (online bulletin boards), or Chinese radio.

### **3. BLOGS VS. ONLINE FORUMS. Blogs are somewhat more useful to respondents than online forums and bulletin boards (“BBS”).<sup>36</sup>**

Of 55 people who responded to the question: "Specifically, which do you find more useful in doing your story research: Blogs or internet forums and BBS?" 25 (46%) said blogs are more useful; 10 (18%) said BBS and forums are more useful; 19 (35%) said they are equally useful; and one person said neither is useful. Many commented that they use blogs and Internet forums for different purposes. Internet forums/BBS's are used more as a way to gauge the public mood, but much of the information is treated with great skepticism due to the anonymity of most people posting. Blogs – authored by one person or a small group of people – are used more for analysis and expert opinion – i.e., “let's see what so and so has to say on [x] issue.” Both are considered sources of story tips. Said one respondent: "We use blogs more for ideas and insights and internet forums more for getting a sense of how people feel about an issue." Said another: "They serve different purposes. Blogs tend to give you story ideas, angles and leads, as well as links to relevant BBS sites. BBS is more useful to gauge public opinions on major events." One Asian journalist who finds BBS and Internet forums more useful than blogs pointed out: "Interesting stories in the Chinese media are more often copied and pasted on to BBS sites. This doesn't happen as often on blogs."

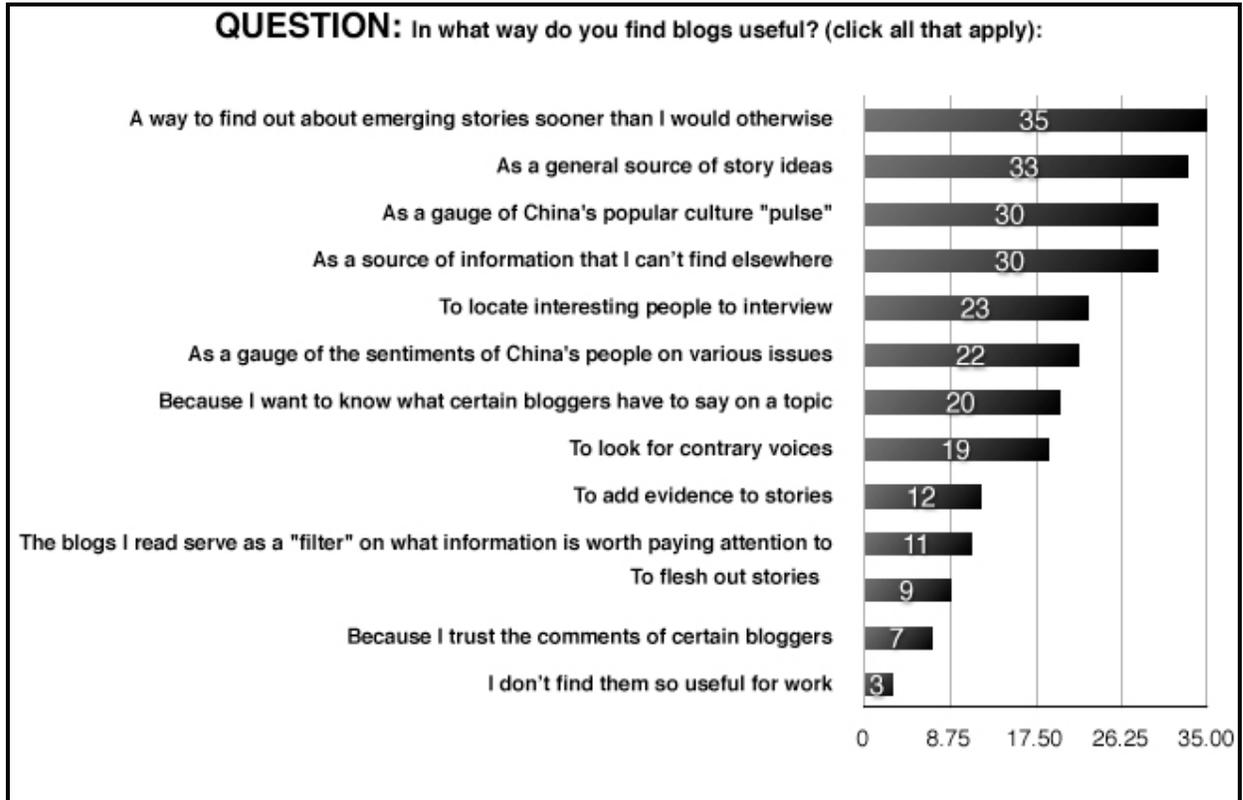
### **4. USEFULNESS OF BLOGS. Most respondents find blogs useful to spot emerging stories and as a general source of story ideas.**

Respondents were asked: "In what way do you find blogs useful?" and provided a range of options to select. Of the 35 journalists who chose to respond to this question, top choices were (in order of popularity): 1. "A way to find out about emerging stories sooner than I would otherwise" (35 responses); 2. "As a general source of story ideas" (33 responses); 3. "As a source of information that I can't find elsewhere" and "As a gauge of China's popular culture "pulse" (both 30 responses); 4. "To locate interesting people to interview" (23 responses); 5. "As a gauge of the sentiments of China's people on various issues" (22 responses); 6. "Because I want to know what certain bloggers have to say on a topic" (20 responses); etc. See Fig. 2 below for the full breakdown.

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<sup>36</sup> An Internet forum was defined to respondents as a place online where many hundreds or thousands of users post information and opinions, and conduct discussions. Different forums have different rules about who can participate or join. In China the most common format for online forums is the BBS or online "bulletin board system."

FIGURE 2:



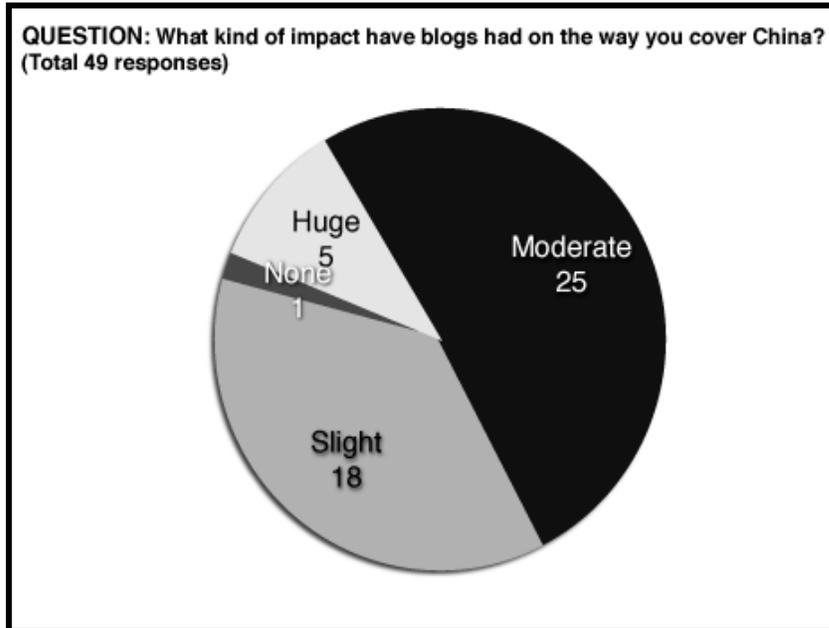
Given the opportunity to comment further about how blogs are useful to them, one news agency reporter wrote: “They're basically a shortcut. If *ESWN* picks up an interesting article in *Nanfang Zhoumo*, I'll make a point to find the paper and look at the coverage myself. But I likely would not have found the article on my own without being tipped off by the blog.”<sup>37</sup> Another newswire reporter who selected “To look for contrary voices” and “I don't find them so useful for work” wrote that he uses blogs: “Basically to see what stories to avoid putting too much focus and resources on, as they are obviously quite widespread if they are being blogged about, there is the occasional aberration to that of course.”

**5. IMPACT OF BLOGS ON COVERAGE. Most agree that blogs have impacted the way they cover China at least to some extent. Blogs have alerted most respondents to stories they might otherwise not have known about and bloggers are frequently contacted by journalists as sources.**

Of the 49 people who answered the question “What kind of impact have blogs had on the way you cover China?” 25 or 51% chose “a moderate impact;” 18 or 37% chose “a slight impact;” 5 or 10% chose “A huge impact;” and only one respondent selected “No impact at all.” (See Fig. 3)

<sup>37</sup> *Nanfang Zhoumo*, or “Southern Weekend,” is a Chinese newspaper that sometimes runs stories that push the line in terms of what censors will allow.

**FIGURE 3:**



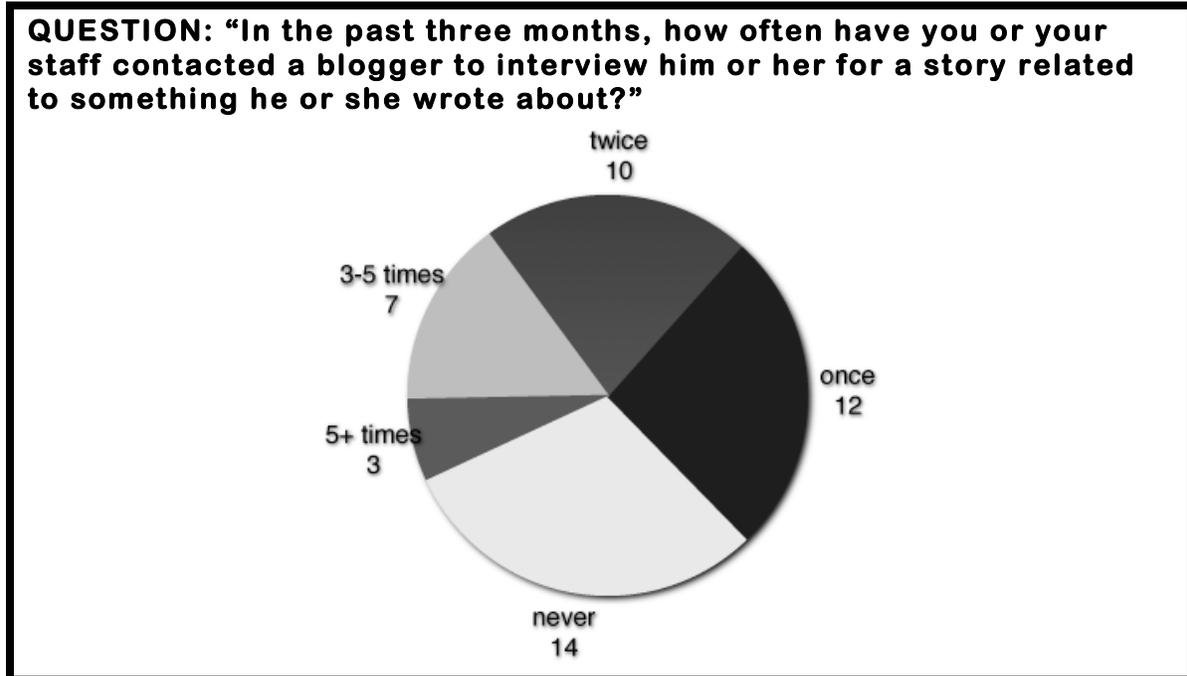
In response to a further question: “Have you ever done a story you would not have known about if you or your staff hadn’t seen it on a blog?” of those same 49 respondents, 39 journalists (80%) selected either “often” or “sometimes” (Three (6%) answered “often,” 36 (74%) answered “sometimes.”) This group included journalists from Reuters, AP, the *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *The Times* of London, National Public Radio, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the *South China Morning Post*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and many other news organizations whose China reporting has a major impact on the way in which publics, policymakers, and financial markets perceive China.<sup>38</sup> One British journalist wrote: “It has changed the way I work. Partly because of blogging, I am trying to move away from writing shorter pieces so that I can concentrate on more value-added stories, which involve lengthy interviews and trips.”

Most responded positively to the question: “In the past three months, how often have you or your staff contacted a blogger to interview him or her for a story related to something he or she wrote about?” 66% of journalists responding to the question claimed to have contacted a blogger at least once in the past three months in order to follow up on something he or she had written for a possible story. (See Figure 4 below for the exact breakdown.)

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<sup>38</sup> Six respondents (12%) answered “once,” and four (8%) answered “never.”

FIGURE 4:



**6. READERSHIP OF CHINESE BLOGS.** Most respondents are following Chinese blogs at least indirectly. However more than half do not read Chinese-language blogs themselves, but rather ask their staff to read them for story research purposes.

In response to the question “Which of the following best describes the main way that you access content from Chinese-language blogs?” 32 (57%) of the 56 people who answered the question chose “I usually ask my staff to help follow Chinese blogs,” while 18 (32%) claimed “I usually read Chinese blogs myself.” Six said that neither they nor their staff follow Chinese language blogs directly.

**7. CHINESE VS. ENGLISH BLOGS.** Non-Chinese (primarily English) blogs about China appear to be read more heavily by foreign journalists than Chinese-language blogs.

23 (47%) of 49 respondents claimed to read non-Chinese blogs “about once a day” while only eight (16%) claimed to be following Chinese blogs “every day” – either directly or indirectly via staff.

Such findings suggest that English-language “bridge blogs” about China have greater direct influence on foreign correspondents who cover China than Chinese-language blogs.

**8. INFLUENCE OF SPECIFIC BLOGS. Of the English-language China blogs, *EastSouthWestNorth* and *Danwei* appear to be substantially more important to respondents than other English-language China-focused blogs.**

Respondents were asked: “Specifically, how often do you read the following China-focused English-language blogs?” A list of choices was then presented, compiled by consulting a number of China-based journalists and asking them which blogs they follow regularly. Figure 5 is a table listing results for blogs read by more than 35% of respondents:

**TABLE 1:**

**QUESTION: “Specifically, how often do you read the following China-focused English-language blogs?”**

	Daily	Several times a week	weekly	A few times a month	Never
<i>EastSouthWestNorth</i> (Roland Soong)	<b>38% (18)</b>	17% (8)	11% (5)	19% (9)	15% (7)
<i>Danwei</i> (Goldkorn et. Al)	25% (12)	17% (8)	19% (9)	<b>31% (15)</b>	8% (4)
<i>China Digital Times</i> (UC Berkeley)	15% (7)	22% (10)	<b>24% (11)</b>	17% (8)	22% (10)
<i>Imagethief</i> (expat P.R. professional in Beijing)	7% (3)	2% (1)	7% (3)	<b>45% (19)</b>	38% (16)
<i>Global Voices Online</i> (China section – GVO highlights non-Western blogs)	2% (1)	10% (4)	17% (7)	29% (12)	<b>41% (17)</b>
<i>Sinofile</i> (Times Online, Jane Macartney)	0% (0)	8% (3)	8% (3)	<b>42% (17)</b>	<b>42% (17)</b>
<i>China Law Blog</i> (written by 2 lawyers)	7% (3)	14% (6)	7% (3)	30% (13)	<b>42% (18)</b>
<i>The Shanghaiist</i> (by expats in Shanghai)	9% (4)	6% (3)	15% (7)	28% (13)	<b>43% (20)</b>
<i>A Glimpse of the World</i> (NYT’s Howard French)	5% (2)	5% (2)	7% (3)	36% (16)	<b>48% (21)</b>
<i>China Herald</i> (Dutch journalist Fons Tuinstra)	7% (3)	7% (3)	5% (2)	21% (9)	<b>60% (26)</b>
Wangjianshuo's English Blog (by a Shanghai-based IT professional)	2% (1)	2% (1)	7% (3)	24% (10)	<b>63% (26)</b>

Of 48 respondents, 66% of those surveyed said they read ESWN at least weekly; 61% read Danwei at least weekly. 38% said they read ESWN "daily," with 25% claiming to read Danwei daily. While opinions differ as to whether *China Digital Times* (a site run from the University of California at Berkeley) is really a blog or simply an aggregator of China news from other sources, it is useful to note for comparison and context that 15% said they read *China Digital Times* daily while 61% said they read it weekly or more.

The survey data supports the author’s observation that the most influential English-language China blogs are presently *EastSouthWestNorth* and *Danwei*. As one respondent wrote: "*ESWN* is so much more important than other blogs that it almost deserves a category by itself. No other blog comes as close to serving as a bridge between Mandarin

and English media." People also cited several story ideas they've gotten from *Danwei*. One journalist said she finds *Danwei* particularly useful because it follows Chinese media regulations very closely and links to original regulations.

A journalist who specializes in editing and rewriting China-focused stories for the website of a broadcast news organization described how blogs – and especially *ESWN* – are useful to her work: "I often use blogs as a measure of just how emerging a story is - if our reporters come in with a story I check to see if the wires have it, and if not to see if Roland Soong [of *ESWN*] has it. If the answer is no and yes, then I'd better write it quickly before someone else gets it. If no and no, I'd better tread carefully and find some more background. It helps to validate and contextualize breaking news covered by our broadcasters, but not always in great depth."

Respondents were not asked to select from a list of Chinese blogs as they were with English blogs because conversations with journalists while drafting the survey indicated that foreign correspondents' reading of Chinese blogs is too diffuse. However respondents were asked to list the Chinese blogs that they find most useful. Some said "prefer not to divulge" or "ask my assistant." Those who did list blogs named a wide range, including blogs by dissident writers, family members of detained people, journalists, technology bloggers, satirists, an artist, a web page hosting blogs by people working for the Ministry of Finance, and entrepreneurs.

**9. RELIABILITY OF BLOGS AS SOURCES. Most respondents find it impossible to answer the question of whether blogs in general are more or less "reliable" compared to other media they follow.**

There is much debate by media pundits and scholars about whether blogs are "credible" or "reliable" compared with conventional news media.<sup>39</sup> Respondents were asked two questions in this vein.

The first question concerned Chinese blogs: "Compared to official PRC media, do you find the information on Chinese-language blogs to be: always more reliable; often more reliable but depends from case to case; equally reliable; often less reliable but depends from case to case; always less reliable; completely depends, impossible to generalize; don't know. Of the 49 who responded to this question 21 (43%) chose "completely depends, impossible to generalize." Equal numbers of people (11 or 22%) chose "often more reliable but depends from case to case" and "often less reliable but depends from case to case." Two people each chose "always more reliable" and "equally reliable."

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<sup>39</sup> See Rebecca MacKinnon, "Blogging, Journalism, and Credibility: Battleground and Common Ground," report from a conference held January 21-22, 2005 at Harvard University, at: <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/webcred/?p=71> (accessed Jan 1, 2007); For highlights of the conference see MacKinnon, "Blogging, Journalism, and Credibility," *The Nation*, March 17, 2005 (online only) at: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050404/mackinnon> (accessed Jan 1, 2007).

When asked to elaborate, one respondent wrote that the question misses the point: "One doesn't go to blogs for information. One goes to blogs for opinion, insight and color. The information in Chinese blogs, like the information purveyed in much [Chinese] state media, needs to be double-checked for accuracy. The utility of blogs lies in their indication of popular interest in a subject, or interested or informed opinion on a matter." Another agreed: "Blogs as well as official media can also be unreliable and not trustworthy sources. It really depends." A veteran correspondent with over a decade's experience covering China for a U.S. news organization wrote: "Blogs can be helpful; they also can increase access to unsubstantiated gossip, rumor and individual bias. When viewed with the appropriate caveats they can be a useful resource; if not they can add to misperceptions about China."

Journalists were then asked a second question about non-Chinese language blogs: "Compared to China coverage by foreign news organizations, English and other non-Chinese language blogs focused on China are: always more reliable; often more reliable but depends from case to case; equally reliable; often less reliable but depends from case to case; always less reliable; completely depends, impossible to generalize; don't know." Of the 50 who responded to this question 19 (38%) chose "completely depends, impossible to generalize;" eleven chose "often more reliable but depends from case to case;" nine chose "often less reliable but depends from case to case;" four chose "equally reliable," three chose "always more reliable," and one chose "always less reliable." The message here is once again all over the map, but with strong leanings toward "completely depends." Again, respondents felt that "reliability" is the wrong way to approach the value of blogs. As one journalist wrote:

Blogs are great for watching topical issues emerge and get dissected, and for aggregating news from a variety of other sources, but they don't necessarily verify the information they serve up. But blogs shouldn't be expected to do this -- it is up to the end-user of the information to decide what to do with it, including verifying sources and facts.

Another wrote:

Reliability isn't what draws me to some blogs. For instance, I look at Roland Soong [author of *ESWN*] to see what's cooking in all sorts of spheres that I would never see otherwise. It's a virtual news tip sheet. Some of it is translation, so reliability may be a big question. But Roland does a huge service by bringing it to our attention.

Such responses paint a picture of "bloggers as tipsters" that is very consistent with the way Soong describes his work as a blogger. Asking whether blogs in general are reliable as journalistic sources is about as useful as asking whether people in general are reliable: it depends on the person. Each tipoff or story idea coming from any person must be judged in a very specific context: Does she have any real expertise in the subject at hand? Is her knowledge first, second, third or fourth hand? Does she bear a grudge or conflict of interest? What is her agenda in posting a particular piece of information? Journalists covering China for major international news organizations have very naturally applied the same criteria they've always used for "offline" human sources to blogs.

Furthermore, the better a journalist knows the blogger as a person, the more likely that blog will be considered useful. As a reporter working for a European news agency put it: “We tend to have personal knowledge of or relations with any blogger we would look at as a source. Otherwise if we could not contact them personally to verify their info we would disregard it. Most Chinese staff are friends with or know the well known Chinese bloggers, and vice versa. In the Chinese journalist world blogs are much more relevant than in the foreign correspondent universe.” Thus China correspondents are not approaching blogs *a priori* in deciding whether to take the blogger’s “tips” seriously.

### **Conclusions and Questions for Further Study:**

As China’s intellectual and cultural elites, as well as China-based professional expatriates, embrace blogging as a medium for promoting their own expertise, blogs have become an essential part of the media diet for most China correspondents. Journalists evaluate each blog according to its individual merits depending on what the journalist knows about the blogger’s background and track record. Based on feedback from journalists and the kinds of blogs they claimed to read regularly, one can draw some conclusions about what kinds of blogs are of greatest value to China correspondents (and likely all journalists). They are those that go beyond personal opinion essay-writing in reaction to news events to contain at least one of the following:

- original information not available elsewhere;
- in-depth perspective based on specialized knowledge;
- information or insight on places and people the journalist cannot easily access;
- links to original documents and resources;
- translated items from the original language on subjects that the international media tends to be interested in – or which they might be convinced to pay attention to if the material is interesting enough.

To what extent can we extrapolate from the relationship between blogs and China correspondence to a more global relationship between blogs and foreign correspondence? Are Israeli and Palestinian bloggers as important to international correspondents covering Israel-Palestine, for example? No known studies exist that would provide data for easy comparison. However it is the author’s hypothesis that the relationship between blogs and foreign correspondence varies widely from place to place. It is likely that blogs are more important to China correspondents than to journalists covering a story such as the Israel-Palestine conflict for several reasons:

- The China story in the international media is not dominated by military conflict or any one obvious single storyline;
- The China story is not generally a “breaking story,” but rather a “process story” about how this complex and geopolitically important country is changing, and what that change means for the rest of the world;
- There is strong demand for specialist insight, information and analysis on a range of subjects;

- Official controls on professional media and public speech in China are strong;
- Many sources are fearful of consequences of speaking directly with foreign journalists;
- Access to on-the-ground or reliable information outside of major cities is often difficult;
- China's Internet population is sufficiently large and the material available on the Chinese Internet is sufficiently interesting in comparison with Chinese mainstream media sources.

In a breaking-news, conflict-oriented region where the local media is lively and diverse, and non-Internet tipsters from all sides abound (such as Israel-Palestine), blogs are unlikely to be as important to the work of a foreign correspondent as in China. A comparative survey of international correspondents covering a range of countries and regions would contribute much to our understanding of how blogs fit into the overall ecosystem of international news. Clearly this paper and small-scale survey reflect only the tiny tip of a very large iceberg of research that has yet to be done.