Chinese journalists' views of UGC producers and journalism: a case study of the boundary work of journalism

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Abstract:

This article examines how journalists defend their boundaries and epistemic authority in the face of the challenges from user-generated content (UGC). It investigates the issue through exploring 51 Chinese journalists' views of UGC producers and journalism. The interviews reveal that in this case study, Chinese journalists' commitment to their social identity as 'people of work units' (*danwei ren*), i.e. their identity is defined by the employment relationship between journalists and news organisations, forms the ground of demarcating the boundaries between journalists and UGC producers. As a result, this group of Chinese journalists reinforces their conventional journalistic norms and identity as 'organisational men/women' and keeps old-fashioned journalism alive. In the meantime, however, they are aware of changes in the environment within which they practice, and therefore they reflect on their work and (re-)define what journalism is in order to adapt to the changes. This case study shows that the boundary work of Chinese journalists interviewed in the study and their understanding of boundaries are contextually bound. The boundary work of journalism is not only about defence but also about adaptation. It offers a perspective for understanding both continuity and change in the transformation of Chinese journalism as well as the boundaries of journalism in general.

Introduction

This article examines how journalists defend their boundaries and epistemic authority in the face of the challenges from user-generated content (UGC), through exploring 51 Chinese journalists' views of UGC producers and journalism. Boundary work is the practice of demarcating and reinforcing the boundaries of professions. Every profession endeavours to construct and maintain a boundary around its field, within which it has epistemic authority in creating knowledge and defining reality (Gieryn 1983; Gieryn 1999). Journalists are no exception to this: they define and defend the boundaries of their profession when they face challenges to their epistemic authority. However, unlike other professions, journalism does not have distinct traits that are able to mark out its boundaries and differentiate it from other professions. The key question in regards to journalism's boundary work is how rather than whether journalism defends its boundaries.

Nowadays, user-generated content (UGC) poses such a challenge. UGC refers to the content produced and published by ordinary users on the Internet (Hermida and Thurman 2008), including that on the websites of news organisations, social media, personal blogs and public forums. Generating UGC has the potential to blur the boundaries between professional journalism and online writing by non-professionals. The existing literature, mostly based on the experience from Western countries, suggests that journalists employ professional norms such as "objectivity" to make their occupation stand out from the activity of ordinary internet users in their boundary work (e.g. Carlson 2007; Örnebring 2013; Blaagaard 2013).

The research reported in this article however reveals that journalists' commitment to their social identity as 'people of work units' (*danwei ren*), i.e. their identity is defined by the employment relationship between journalists and news organisations, forms the ground of demarcating the boundaries between journalists and UGC producers. The claim to professional norms is a job-related feature. As a result, this group of Chinese journalists reinforces their conventional journalistic norms and identity as 'organisational men/women' and keeps old-fashioned journalism alive. In the meantime, however, they are aware of changes in the environment within which they practice, and therefore they reflect on their work and (re-)define what journalism is in order to adapt to the changes. This case study shows that the boundary work of Chinese journalists interviewed in the study and their understanding of boundaries are contextually bound. The boundary work of journalism is not only about defence but also about adaptation. It offers a perspective for understanding both continuity and change in the transformation of

Chinese journalism as well as the boundaries of journalism in general.

Journalism, UGC and boundary work

All professions practice boundary work in order to be distinguished from neighbouring occupations, to gain and to retain their social legitimacy and prestige (Abbott 1988; Dooley 1997; Larson 1977; Klegon 1978; Freidson 1994; Macdonald 1995). Boundary maintenance is especially necessary for the occupation of journalism. Unlike the classic professions of law and medicine, journalism has no clear traits that can draw an apparent distinction between journalism and other occupations (Allison 1986). Boundary work is a common practice to affirm journalistic authority - journalists' epistemic authority (Zelizer 1993). Journalists and news organisations themselves construct and retain their epistemic authority as legitimate reality definers through constantly building, defending and maintaining boundaries by claiming to operate according to professional norms especially 'objectivity' (Winch 1997; Carlson 2007; Clayman 2002; Winch 1997; Bishop 1999).

The current new media era has seen a proliferation of UGC and an increasing participation by Internet users in public communication. Newsrooms seemingly are keen to integrate UGC into ordinary news practice. Various news channels have set up programmes for UGC. Prominent among others are Yahoo and Reuters' *You Witness News*, BBC's *Your News*, and CNN's *I-report*. The participatory journalism phenomenon has emerged (Borger, Hoof et al. 2013). Traditional news reports have adopted UGC, especially in emergencies such as the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks¹.

Nevertheless, the emergence of UGC literally blurs the occupational boundaries between journalism and non-journalism and disintegrates journalistic authority over information production and story-telling (Witschge and Nygren 2009; Deuze 2008; Chouliaraki 2012). Through participation in journalistic practice, for example, ordinary citizens become news producers or journalists' collaborators instead of news consumers (Barnes 2012). In crisis reporting the fact that the wide adoption internationally of witness images made by users shapes journalistic professionalism suggests a need to rethink the professional norms and roles of journalism (Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013). Bloggers have also grasped the chance to steal journalistic authority, because a range of external and internal factors have caused journalists to neglect news information (Lowrey 2006). Under such circumstances, journalists need to make every effort to maintain a distinction between themselves and the bloggers and to retain their role as authoritative producers and providers of information (Carlson 2007; Lowrey 2006).

Much of the literature on journalists' views of UGC suggests that journalists do indeed practice boundary work in the face of the challenges UGC presents to their

authority. The existing literature, mainly drawing from Western experience and thus limited to it, has identified two features of journalism's boundary work. First, journalists employ conventional journalistic norms such as 'objectivity' and 'balanced reporting' to criticise UGC for being unreliable and biased. Carlson, for example, has found that the doubt expressed by journalists over the reliability and quality of blogs comes from their belief in fact-based objectivity (Carlson 2007). The same norms have also been adopted to demarcate journalists from 'citizen journalists' as demonstrated in later studies (e.g. Örnebring 2013; Blaagaard 2013). Professional norms lie at the heart of journalism's boundary work, acting as essential elements that identify journalism as professional.

Secondly, apart from sticking to old-fashioned journalism practice and professionalism, journalists disagree that their practice has been affected by UGC. BBC journalists, for instance, see UGC as a type of ordinary 'audience material' and thus have seen few changes in journalistic practice (Wardle and Williams 2010). A survey of European journalists in 11 countries reveals a tension between traditional journalism and digital journalism in the response to the challenges and changes brought by the Internet (O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008). They contend that journalists, though appearing to be progressive in terms of the Internet, are not worried about the emergence of citizen journalists. Citizen participation in online journalism - participatory journalism - is regarded as strategically confined and managed by journalism and conditioned by external political systems. Therefore journalism still retains control over the crucial stages of the news production process (Domingo, Quandt et al. 2008; Domingo 2011; Suau and Masip 2013; Vujnovic, Singer et al. 2010).

Nevertheless, the literature has two limitations. First, boundary work is dependent on a particular social context (Cozzens and Gieryn 1990; Gieryn 1983; Gieryn 1999). While the literature tells us the responses of journalists in the Western context to the challenges posed by UGC, we have little knowledge about the situation in other social contexts and about the impact of the existing contextually-forged features of journalism on the reactions of journalists to UGC. Second, most of the literature is about journalists' responses to participatory journalism, which refers to the participation of readers in making and disseminating news on news websites or in online journalism practiced by traditional news organisations (e.g. Domingo 2011; Suau and Masip 2013; Vujnovic, Singer et al. 2010; Singer 2011; Borger, Hoof et al. 2013). However, UGC includes not only content generated by practicing participatory journalism but also that produced by ordinary Internet users on other online platforms such as social media sites, personal blogs or public forums. The gap in the literature therefore limits our understanding of the

boundary work of journalism: how does journalism in other social contexts practice boundary work as a response to UGC in a general sense (i.e. not restricted to content produced by participatory journalism)? And what role do the existing contextually-bound features of journalism play?

Journalism and UGC in China

China presents a unique case for examining the boundary work of journalism, given the four characteristic features of Chinese journalism. First, Chinese journalists face a dilemma between developing towards an independent occupation and serving as propagandists for the Party-state. Before the 1980s, the fact that journalists were personnel within the governmental system (*tizhi nei renyuan*) legitimised journalists as the authoritative information producers and disseminators, but meanwhile blurred the distinction between journalists and the Party's information officials or propagandists. After the 1980s, media commercialization has brought a plurality of journalism genres, a diversity of journalists, and the establishment of hybrid journalistic standards and communities of journalists (Hassid 2011). Journalism has gradually separated from the political system in terms of financial incomes, human resources, and the practices and management of news organisations. This separation is an essential prerequisite for journalism to develop into an independent occupation and to progressively establish its boundaries. Meanwhile scholars have given their attention to the professionalization of Chinese journalism and started seeing journalism as an established profession (e.g. discussed in the works by Lin 2010; Yong and Lee 2009 and Hassid 2011). Nevertheless, political control over journalistic practice and work has not ceased. The Party-state continues to expect journalists to be its propagandists, which greatly inhibits the occupational independence of journalism. Under such circumstances, the nature of journalism drives journalists to take any possible chances to increase their autonomy. The rise of investigative journalism in the late 1990s, to take an example, signals the willingness of Chinese journalism to seek autonomy from the state and its associated ruling system (Sæther 2008). It is therefore crucial for Chinese journalism to strike the balance between taking on the expected role of propagandist and being an independent occupation.

Second, journalists historically do not think of readers as citizens (Lee 2005). Following both its Confucianist and communist intellectual traditions, Chinese journalists see readers as masses (Lee 2005), while media marketisation leads journalists to treat readers as the audience and as consumers (Zhang 2000). The perception of readers as "masses" sees them lacking the ability to think reasonably for and by themselves and to judge whether information is right or wrong. Instead, journalists need to tell readers what is right and what is wrong. Seeing readers as the

audience and as consumers cherishes the active role of readers in communication but views readers as the target of advertising and therefore apolitical and caring more about material enjoyment than news.

Third, the traditional identity of being "people of work units", which means people's social identity is determined by their employment status, has endowed Chinese journalists with an intimate relationship to news organisations. Before the 1980s, all social benefits enjoyed by journalists went through their work units (Jernow and Thurston 1993). Therefore, journalists enjoyed "iron-bowls"- not only were their jobs permanent and secure but they guaranteed them steady and unlimited social benefits. In a word, there was a very close tie between journalists and news organisations in both work and life. Although the personnel reform in the 1980s introduced the flexible market employment system into the field of journalism, the within-system employment (*tizhinei pinyong*)- that's to say, being employed by a news organisation means being allocated a position within the government system - still exists in both party organs and commercial news organisations and even occupies a dominant position in party organs (Lin 2010).

Fourth, the mingling of activism and journalism has been prominent in the history of Chinese journalism. Famous Chinese journalists such as Piaoping Shao, Baohuang Xu and Gongzhen Ge have engaged heavily in the activity of advocacy, and taking on the role of activists is seen as part of the role of journalists in the advocacy tradition of Chinese journalism (see Mackinnon 1997 for Chinese activist journalists; see Hassid 2011 for Chinese advocacy journalists).

Given the particularities of Chinese journalism, UGC has brought some unique opportunities and challenges. Apart from offering an enormous source of news and hooks for journalists, the proliferation of UGC in the Chinese context particularly provides the most important opportunity: the possibility of increasing journalistic autonomy. Heated discussions online about social issues contribute to circumventing political control. In this respect, UGC has the potential to help Chinese journalism to build its profession and to consolidate its professional boundaries. Therefore, there has been evidence of collaboration between UGC producers and journalists in setting and developing news agendas, as exemplified in the cases of the Chongqing Nail House² in 2007, the Yihuang Demolition and Self-immolation³ in 2010, the Wenzhou High-speed Train Crash Accident⁴ in 2011, and Yang Dacai's Watch-gate Scandal⁵ in 2012. Notwithstanding the importance of UGC to journalism, given journalists' traditional view of readers as masses as well as the audience and consumers, the question must arise as to whether Chinese journalists will see UGC producers as their collaborators or 'citizen journalists'.

In terms of challenges, the rise of UGC breaks down the boundaries of Chinese

journalism in two ways. First, like elsewhere in the world, by its very nature UGC suggests that journalists are not the sole information producers and disseminators and therefore journalistic authority is impaired. Second, while being able to get around political control as well as the institutional prohibition on the content they publish, journalists' publishing of messages of their own on the Internet might make indistinct the boundaries between their job duties and personal postings. This is especially the case when individual journalists publish their personal posts online in order to promote a campaign or a set of values, their active individual online participation may reinforce their image as activists but weaken their job-related identity as journalists.

The distinctive characteristics of Chinese journalism as well as the particular chances and challenges UGC presents result in some interesting questions with regards to the boundary work of Chinese journalism. If Chinese journalists conduct boundary work, what do they use to defend their occupational boundaries? What role do the unique features of the Chinese media play in the boundary work of journalism? What changes have been caused in journalism as a result? The present study aims to answer these questions through exploring journalists' views of UGC producers and their own occupation. The answers will lift the veil over the boundary work of journalism in the Chinese context and contribute to the literature in general.

Methodology

Fifty-one in-depth interviews with journalists from across various media were carried out in 2011-2012. All interviews were recorded. The recordings were transcribed and uploaded onto Nvivo for a qualitative analysis. Anonymity was agreed with all interviewees. The basic profiles of the interviewees (summarized in Table 1) indicate that the majority of them have more than 10 years of working experience as journalists and are from commercial print media. These journalists were recruited according to three criteria. First, they are famous for their reports in their areas of expertise, such as political, economic, health and environmental reporting. Second, they have actively used the Internet in their work, such as looking for news tips and contacting news sources, and observed online discussions for quite a while. Third, they have experience of publishing on their own on the Internet. For example, one interviewee was selected because he specialised in reporting on social issues, had produced nationally influential reports, had actively adopted UGC in his reports and published his personal messages online. Given the particularity of the sample, the findings of this study may be different from those of a study that is drawn on a sample comprising of inexperienced and junior journalists or journalists who work only at TV or new media. Thus, in the analysis, special care has been taken

in avoiding the generalization of the research findings.

The interviews were guided by a set of questions designed around the central question of ‘how do you view UGC producers and journalism?’ Journalists were invited to respond to questions such as:

1. Do you see UGC producers as ‘citizen journalists’ or collaborators of journalists?
2. How different is your work to the practice of UGC producers?
3. Does UGC present any challenges to your journalistic work?
4. Are you still a journalist, an individual and independent UGC producer, or an activist when you produce and publish your own messages on the Internet?
5. For what purposes do you produce and publish your own messages on the Internet?

Follow-up questions were asked where appropriate when the interviewees provided their answers to these questions.

There are three analytical focuses: 1) whether journalists see the practice of UGC producers as equivalent/similar to that of journalism; 2) how journalists distinguish themselves from ordinary UGC producers, and if they regard the two types of practice as different; 3) how journalists view their job and occupation in the present new media environment. The interview questions and the qualitative analysis have been designed and conducted with the aim of answering the research questions enumerated above.

Table 1 Profiles of the interviewees interviewed in the study

Types of media	Years of working as journalists	Numbers of Interviewees
Print ⁶	20+	3
	10-20	21
	5-10	10
	1-5	5
Broadcasting ⁷	20+	2
	10-20	2
	5-10	2
	1-5	1
Online media ⁸ (E.g. <i>Sina news</i>)	10-20	4
News agency	10-20	1

Findings: Chinese Journalists' Views of UGC producers and Journalism

UGC producers as information providers

All interviewees regard UGC producers as amateurs and do not see UGC producers as 'citizen journalists', nor as collaborators of journalists. Interviewees refer to UGC producers as lay 'netizens' (*wangmin*)⁹ who provide news tips and hooks for them. UGC producers are thought to have the following characteristics: 1) being vast in number, smart, influential but emotional, 2) tending to imagine (rather than investigate) what has happened in society, 3) acting as information providers and 4) lacking a persistent interest in information production and publication.

In the eyes of interviewees, UGC producers are not practicing journalism, partly because they neither check the information they publish nor investigate occurrences. Therefore, such information lacks credibility. Interviewees see UGC producers as failing to check and verify facts mainly because as journalists they treat information publishing as a job-related activity. First, netizens lack a real and long-term interest in and the extensive time needed for reporting on news events and are deficient in the skills that fact-checking requires because reporting is not their job. In other words, netizens lack job-related interest and literacy. Second, netizens do not have a professional commitment to exploring, investigating and publishing a story.

Despite acknowledging that on some occasions UGC can be very influential, interviewees believe that for most of the time, UGC fails to consistently engage readers' interest. Netizens can produce and provide interesting information only when they are on the site of a news event or can access 'core information'. 'Core information' (*hexin xinxi*), referring to the key information involved in news reports and usually obtained from authoritative news sources, determines the exclusivity of news reports. UGC producers are regarded as unable to collect 'core information' from authoritative news sources because they normally lack access to these news sources. Such access is more or less guaranteed by being employed by a news organisation.

For these reasons, interviewees consider that UGC producers are more like information providers than 'citizen journalists' or journalists' collaborators. Even as information providers, the information UGC producers occasionally offer journalists is usually incomplete. It is incomplete because it is only a small fragment of the full picture of events and thus needs journalists to verify its credibility and to reveal the full picture. The following remarks of an interviewee clearly exemplify this point:

"I think, for netizens, if they are involved in a news event, probably can provide us with some information they know. However, information of this kind may be very fragmented and incomplete. Some information may be true, but not all is true, though this does not necessarily mean they are lying to us. They are

probably just biased. They will not check information and publish an article based on their investigation into a news event. If they can do that, they are practicing journalism. But obviously, they would not” (Interview, 2011).

Differentiating journalists from UGC producers

In interviewees' opinion, practicing journalism as a job and being employed by news organisations serve as two core elements in making journalists different from UGC producers. Overall, interviewees believe that what UGC producers lack are exactly the things that journalists are adept at. Journalists have (and should take) the responsibility for investigating into and writing stories in an objective and balanced way, as this is their job. Therefore, journalists have to ensure the credibility of their reports, which needs to be supported by a 'complete chain of evidence' (*wanzheng de zhengju lian*). They are able to, and obliged to, check all facts and information involved through investigation prior to writing-up and publishing their reports, as part of their job requirements. In addition, they enjoy superiority in accessing authoritative news sources and thus can obtain "core information". Interviewees regard "fact-checking" and "investigation" as essential to being professional journalists. And the capacity and responsibility to do so fundamentally differentiates journalists from UGC producers. The majority of interviewees have used their social identity as employees of a news organisation to define the profession of journalism. For them, this identity guarantees the high level of skills and literacy that journalists possess as well as the necessary on-the-job training that journalists receive. Being professional journalists should be premised on these skills and training. Interviewees see their own writing practice as an on-the-job activity endorsed by their news organisations, whereas UGC producers' practice is a purely individual and personal activity. To have 'professional skills, investigation and training' is regarded as making 'revealing the truth' and 'being objective' possible. Journalists are also guided by organisational guidelines, practice standards and professional norms such as 'objectivity' and 'balanced reporting', but UGC producers are not. For interviewees, therefore, the job-related nature of journalistic work nicely differentiates journalism from UGC producers. An employment relationship with news organisations ensures time, financial support, organisational guidance, professional norms and on-the-job training that journalists need for carrying out fact-checking and investigation.

Even for journalists' personal postings, some ninety percent of interviewees regard their individual postings as inseparable from and an extension of their journalistic practice as long as they are doing the job of journalism and are employed by news organisations. Most interviewees have expressed the intention of separating their individual postings from their journalistic practice and to stress their own

individualism. For example, they like to remove the label of "V"¹⁰ from their Weibo (previously called *Sina Weibo*, the Chinese version of Twitter) IDs or even to use pseudonyms. In doing so, they can avoid mentioning their employers' names and their identity as journalists. Despite that, interviewees agree that their personal posting is inevitably related to their job and professional journalistic work. As an interviewee who is well-known for reporting social issues has commented: *"this (not mentioning the employer's name) would most possibly reduce the association between you and your employer on social media and meanwhile stress your own individualism. I feel, at some points, my Weibo account is indeed my self-made media, an outlet owned and run by me; this is nothing to do with my employer; though, in fact, you cannot completely separate your name from your employer."* This statement shows that the interviewee prefers presenting himself as an independent individual rather than as a journalist employed by a news organisation. He apparently appreciates the autonomy of self-publishing that the Internet gives him. Even so, he still doubts that the connection between his individual posting and his occupational identity as a journalist can be avoided. The following quote of another interviewee takes this doubt further and reckons the two as inseparable; therefore the social identity of a journalist remains in his self-publishing:

"Sometimes perhaps you would find it very difficult to identify yourself as a journalist who is employed by a news organisation or only as an individual netizen. The line between the two is blurred. It would be especially difficult when you are expressing your viewpoints on a report and relevant issues, on reports that you have participated in reporting, or on issues relating to your own employer in your personal posts."

Nevertheless, the majority of interviewees believe the connection depends on what kind of content is published online. If journalists post something relating to their work or journalism in general, they are journalists; if they post merely about their private lives, they are ordinary netizens. However, overall, interviewees feel it is difficult to completely distinguish these two types of content that mingle together as their lives often mix with their work. Therefore, they are still journalists for most of the time when they publish their personal posts online.

Most interviewees also argue that professional standards and norms should be used to guide and evaluate their individual posting, which is often related to their job. For example, an interviewee with ten years' experience in print media says: *"(When journalists publish their personal messages), first of all, they should not be lying and publishing fake information and second, they should make initial value judgments (before publishing information), because they are professional media workers"*. This quote indicates that the journalist's occupational awareness remains in producing

and publishing his own messages and he wants to apply the standards of journalistic practice. Interviewees also take for granted that their individual posting is different from or even better than that of ordinary Internet users. When commenting on his own Weibo usage, an interviewee who has worked in print media for more than twenty years remarked: *"however, I use Weibo in a way that is different from how those kids use Weibo. They tend to post content like 'today I ate something somewhere', etc."* This comment suggests a superior attitude of the interviewee in which ordinary Internet users are referred to as 'kids' and their UGC practice is seen as immature kids' behaviour, whereas his own practice is serious and mature.

When talking about those journalists who actively publish their individual messages in order to advocate their beliefs, most interviewees do not see them as still being journalists. An interviewee made the following statement when he commented on the activities of a well-known activist journalist: *"he now perhaps no longer sees himself as a journalist. He perhaps has already given himself another identity. This is a kind of identity shift. Such changes, however, are not a collective problem that the occupation of journalism is facing. This is only his individual choice."* This statement suggests the interviewee tends to separate individual journalists who have already embarked on activism from the occupation of journalism, for the sake of boundary maintenance.

Only two out of the 51 interviewees see themselves as activist journalists. Both of them are from commercial print media. They try to disconnect their individual activist activities from on-the-job journalistic practice and use professional norms such as objectivity to justify their practices. For example, one interviewee who is well-known for being an activist journalist has remarked: *"what I have done is merely to objectively observe and record what happened, which is a typical thing a professional journalist would do"*. This is an example of turning to professional norms of objectivity for legitimating journalists' activist activities.

The profession of journalism in the UGC era

When interviewees demarcate journalists from UGC producers, they also reflect on their role and practice and (re-)define the concept of journalism. They consider the professional norms of journalism (should) remain intact. Three intertwined professional norms - 'objectivity', "reporting the truth" and "balanced reporting"- of old-fashioned journalism (but relatively new to Chinese journalism) continue to be central to the concept of being professional journalists. This is exemplified by an interviewee who commented that: *"from my point of view, the responsibility of journalists (in the new media era) of course is still to report the truth - the most objective and most complete truth that can endure the test of time and history."* Even

interviewees who have moved to work for Internet portals such as Sina.com and Tencent.com continue to use the same norms to evaluate their work in making and editing news content for web portals. A prominent example is the view of an interviewee who was an experienced and eminent print media journalist. At the time when the interview took place, he was directing the news content department at a big Internet portal in China. He used the same three norms - 'objectivity', "reporting the truth" and "balanced reporting"- to guide content selection and production in his unit. That is to say, for this interviewee, the professional norms of traditional journalism are applicable to online journalism.

When asked whether UGC poses challenges to journalism, interviewees agree that UGC has brought more chances than challenges to journalism in terms of reporting autonomy and opportunities. Some interviewees feel the only challenge UGC presents lies in the impact of UGC on the agenda-setting function of journalism. Some of them think that the initiatives of public communication have now been taken over by the Internet from traditional news media, as exemplified in the case of Guo Meimei¹¹ in 2011.

An opposite view among interviewees, nevertheless, sees UGC as unable to set the news agenda. This is because, for most of the time, UGC relies on traditional journalists' investigations and reports to broaden its influence and get its messages across to political authorities and governments. An interviewee, for instance, has commented that *"UGC perhaps only attracts the attention of netizens, rather than the attention of governments. UGC can only be noticed by the wider society after being processed (checked and written into reports) by us. Only at that time, can we say the agenda has been set"*. A prominent example of this given by some interviewees is the case of Nail House in 2006. In this case, online posts about the nail house had been available on the Internet for quite a while and had not attracted any attention from society, let alone the attention of the government. The situation changed only when the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* started reporting on this issue.

Surprisingly, a prevailing view among interviewees is that journalism can benefit from the changes in the media environment triggered by the surge in the number of UGC. First of all, through making use of the influence of UGC, journalists can obtain journalistic autonomy. An interviewee has elaborated this in the following way: *"the Internet provides us with a chance... we can report what we would like to report in the name of what is being hotly discussed by netizens. The netizen's discussions give us a good reason to do what we cannot do otherwise."* UGC therefore provides news sources, story tips and news hooks for journalism. In this respect, interviewees especially acknowledge the positive impacts of Weibo content on their practice. For example, an interviewee with 12 years' working experience in print media found that

"from last year to this year (2011), about 60-70% of the most interesting stories I reported were from Weibo" (interview 2011). However, interviewees - especially those who work for party organs (here TV stations and a news agency)- are more likely to trust and cite online content produced and published by traditional news media than by ordinary Internet users. For example, an interviewee who was Deputy Director of a TV department at the time of the interview recalled when he was on duty, on average up to 70% of news sources that were quoted from the Internet were published by other news organisations such as CCTV online.

All interviewees admit that changes have occurred particularly in journalistic skills and actual practices such as news source citation, as a result of the proliferation of UGC. In the current media ecology, journalistic practice should include three essential elements: to search, check and validate information; to logically organize and combine all kinds of facts into a coherent story supported by a 'complete chain of evidence'; and to recover the true face of events. These three new elements have transformed journalistic practice nowadays. More emphasis in journalistic practice should be placed on verifying information drawn from different news sources as well as on constructing a 'complete chain of evidence' in the new media era than in the past. The capacity to master new skills quickly thus is necessary for journalistic work in the new media era.

The prevalence of UGC has also given rise to the emergence of new types of news that mainly originate from discussions or information published online. The emergence of news of this kind is deemed as reflecting changes in the journalistic judgment of political risk and news values. For example, several interviewees from the commercial print media believed that their news value criteria had changed in recent years as a result of the rise of UGC. An example they have used is the fact that the idea *"good news is news that will make you feel afraid"* becomes one criterion for their news value judgment. According to these interviewees, this point is well exemplified in the reporting of Chongqing Nail House: *"that picture (of the nail house) had been out there on the internet for more than a week. Before we reported on this picture, no one would think: oh, such a picture could turn into a piece of news, a piece of news with national influence, and even a piece of big news that can change the constitutional process in China! At that time (before reporting the story), such an idea had not been developed"*. In their view, it is the public fear of unrestricted political power that lies behind the success of reports on this case. This criterion of 'being able to make people feel afraid' is now embedded into their news value judgment criteria.

Discussion and Conclusion: The Boundary Work of Chinese journalists

From the views outlined above, one can see that this group of Chinese journalists has not willingly opened up the boundaries of journalism to include UGC producers and given up their epistemic authority to UGC producers. Interviewees are practicing boundary work: they have clearly distinguished themselves from ordinary UGC producers, drawing up a remarkable distinction between the two groups. Although recognizing the socio-political importance of UGC, interviewees regard UGC as 'news source material', which is similar to "audience material" in Wardle and Williams' terms (2010), and see themselves as being superior to ordinary UGC producers in relation to information production and dissemination. UGC producers are neither (potential) collaborators with journalists nor competitors. This view is opposite to the argument that there is a tendency towards collaboration that leads to 'networked journalism' (Chouliaraki 2012 and Jarvis 2006).

By contrast, interviewees see journalists as professionals on the basis that they are employed by news organisations and practicing journalism as a job. The identity as employees of news organisations, i.e. 'people of work units', means investigating, writing and publishing are job-related activities and something journalists have to do professionally. The job trains journalists to produce credible content in a professional way, while organisational guidelines and professional norms guide and limit journalistic practices to ensure they are professional. In this sense, the typical employment relationship between journalists and news organisations is crucial in the boundary work of Chinese journalism and marks out the boundaries of journalism. Not only agreed professional norms but also job-related skills, job-guaranteed time, and job-required interests separate journalists from UGC producers. Like journalists in other societies, they rely on classic journalistic professional norms such as 'objectivity', 'reporting the truth' and 'balanced reporting' for boundary maintenance. This confirms the finding of previous studies in other social contexts (such as Carlson 2007; Örnebring 2013; Blaagaard 2013). But these job-related norms are not the only thing that these interviewees have used for boundary maintenance in this case study. Specially, traditional journalistic skills such as "fact-checking" and "investigation" as well as existing job-related features - especially 'fluent access to authoritative news sources', 'journalistic skills', 'employment relationship with news organisations' and 'on-the-job training received' - are deemed as prerequisites for being professional journalists and thus can be used to defend journalists' boundaries. This means that interviewees are falling back on the advantages that journalism enjoyed and the features of journalism in the old days to claim their professional status at the present time.

The boundary work is also evident when interviewees extend their professional

practices to include their individual postings, but exclude activist journalists. Even when interviewees themselves become part of participatory culture on the Internet, their occupational status as 'organisational men/women' separates their individual postings from that of ordinary Internet users and makes their own posting an extension of their professional practice. When interviewees become aware of the obscuring of the distinction between journalism and activism, they naturally exclude those activist journalists, maintaining the purity of the profession. In doing so, interviewees not only articulate the differences between their individual postings and ordinary Internet users' postings, but also clarify the boundaries between journalists and activists.

In common with O'Sullivan and Heinonen's (O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008) findings in other cultural contexts, in general, Chinese journalists interviewed in this study are still practicing old-fashioned journalism and their professional norms remain the same as a result of their boundary work. In the Chinese context, influenced by the tradition of being "people within the system", interviewees reinforce their identity as "people of work units", or, in other words, 'organisational men/women'. Their boundary work thus draws up a dichotomy between employment-haves and have-nots. Therefore, interviewees accept that practicing journalism is an organisational rather than an individual activity. This definition vitally differentiates journalists from UGC producers. If journalism is premised on the fact that journalists are employed by news organisations, any possibilities of acknowledging the existence of alternative types of journalism such as citizen journalism will be fundamentally precluded. Committing to the identity of 'organisational men/women' however shows a contradiction in interviewees' attitudes toward journalistic autonomy. On one hand, interviewees struggle for more reporting autonomy. What is distinctive in the study is that journalists treat UGC producers as leverage in obtaining journalistic autonomy from political authorities. This point shows journalists' initiatives in maintaining their occupational independence and trying to turn the challenges received from UGC into opportunities to develop their occupation. On the other hand, however, they accept organisational restrictions on their autonomy as a result of sticking to organisational regulations and interests.

This case study confirms some findings based on Western experience, but meanwhile provides some new perspectives to the boundary work of journalism and understanding the idea of journalism in the Chinese context. In a manner similar to journalism in Western contexts, this group of Chinese journalists have the instinct to demarcate and protect their professional boundaries. The occupational nature of journalism is thus de-contextualised. However, both their boundary work and their

views of UGC producers and journalism are very contextually defined. Interviewees repeatedly acknowledge the opportunities UGC producers offer for journalism to get away from political control, gain more autonomy and amplify the effects of their own publication. This of course is influenced by the relationship between journalism and the state in the national context and comes from their wish to obtain occupational independence. However, influenced by the historical view of readers as masses, interviewees do not regard UGC producers as possessing the capacity to tell credible from false information. Influenced by the intellectual tradition of Confucianism, interviewees are likely to see themselves as superior to UGC producers in terms of publishing information. Interviewees' view of the difference between journalists and UGC producers is deeply rooted in the tradition of 'people of work units'. Interviewees turn to their social identity based on employment relations – of which professional norms are only one part - to demarcate boundaries. Interviewees are willing to compromise their individuality in order to be organisational men or women and commit to organisational guidelines and norms.

However, not all contextual traditions are accepted and consequential here. For the activist tradition, interviewees reject the association between journalism and activism. On one hand, this rejection contributes to the establishment of journalism's professional image. On the other, it can be seen as a response to the state-journalism relationship: activism which is too obvious is perhaps not appropriate as it may annoy the state and the political authorities.

Unlike their western counterparts who believe that few changes have appeared in journalistic practices as a result of UGC, (according to the existing literature), interviewees in this case study have admitted that their journalistic practices have changed and that Chinese journalism is being transformed along with the rise of UGC. Although seeing them as amateurs, the interviewees have confirmed the importance of UGC producers and their impacts on traditional journalism. Interviewees believe that journalists' actual practice has already undergone an adjustment to cope with changes in the work environment. Therefore, the boundary work of journalism is about defending as well as adaptation. The emergence of new skills, new ways of source selection and verification and new value judgments and criteria for what constitutes news may modify the narratives of news stories as well as the types of topics in news media coverage. It would, therefore, be interesting to examine whether or not there is an alteration in media content in future research.

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¹ Both refer to a series of terrorist attacks. The former, which are believed to have been launched by al-Qaeda, occurred in New York and Washington D.C, the USA, while the latter took place in the public transport system in London, the UK.

² In Chongqing, a couple rejected the request of real estate developers, who wanted to demolish it, to leave their house. Their battle became popular first on the Internet and then was picked up by traditional media. In this case, for the first time, China has seen its own "citizen journalists": netizens who visited the scene of the nail house and reported on this event on the Internet.

³ In Yihuang, the members of a family with the surname Zhong fought against the local government's decision to demolish their home and immolated themselves. The tragedy was brought to national

scrutiny through the collaboration of netizens and journalists.

⁴ The participation of netizens in discussing the causes, rescue and compensation of the victims of the high-speed train crash in Wenzhou provided news sources for offline journalism and pushed political authorities to increase the transparency of information and the amount of compensation.

⁵ A news picture showed Yang Dacai, the former head of Shaanxi province's Bureau of Work Safety, was smiling at the scene of a road accident. Furious netizens collected evidence showing that he owned a number of luxury watches and glasses. Traditional media reported the findings of netizens. Yang was soon removed from his post and arrested for corruption.

⁶ Print media refer to big commercial newspapers and magazines at the central and provincial administrative levels.

⁷ Broadcasting media is defined as television stations at the central and provincial administrative levels.

⁸ Online media refer to the news sections of main Internet portals, such as *Sina* and *NetEast*, in China but do not include the websites of traditional news organisations, blogs or social media.

⁹ Netizens (*wangmin*) means Internet users.

¹⁰ A label of 'V' will be added to users' IDs on their Weibo accounts, after members of *Sina* staff have checked and verified the users' background information, especially the information about their employers and occupations. Therefore, "V" is a symbol of the credibility of the users, which is confirmed by *Sina*.

¹¹ In this case, private and personal content published by this girl on social media sites led to national fury and suspicion towards the Red Cross, China charity.