ONLINE JOURNALISM IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS
—A community structure approach

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This framing and discourse analysis documents the news coverage of a fire in Shanghai by the Chinese press, represented by a party-organ newspaper and three metro dailies. The findings illustrate the way commercial metro dailies side with their urban civic-minded readers to create an alternative news discourse that differs from that of the party journalism in China. The discourse analysis provides an empirical illustration of a new constructionist approach to community structural analysis. The interaction between the press and the online public, and the convergence of news production and consumption processes, have essentially changed the news framing process. This signifies a shift of the journalist paradigm towards a participatory model in the contemporary Chinese news environment.

Introduction

The community structure model explores the influence of society on the press. Challenging the classic notion of journalistic "objectivity," the community structure approach attempts to contextualize journalism in its social environment. It enables scholars to use unobtrusive empirical measures to gauge structural characteristics that pre-date news coverage and test causal relationships between social contexts and news coverage (Pollock, 2007).

This study adapts and applies community structure analysis to a case in China through a framing and discourse analysis that attempts to obtain a holistic and deep characterization of community structure in the context of China's contemporary sociopolitical environment. In this environment, the rise of a market sector in the press system, the development of an incipient civil society, and the diffusion of the Internet all come together to influence journalistic practices and news discourses. Working within a constructionist framework, this study conceptualizes news text as discourse constructed, transmitted, and acted upon jointly in a circular framing process by the media, audiences and other relevant social players. Shared or contested social beliefs and values among these social groups set the parameters of the broad context in which this framing process takes place (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

This study illustrates the way commercial newspapers ''align'' themselves with their urban civic-minded readers to create an alternative news discourse that differs from that of the dominant party journalism. The most significant result of the collaboration

between journalists and online users, and the convergence of the news production and consumption processes, is a new participatory journalism model. This new model contrasts to the classic objective model and the ''guard dog'' model that suggests news media function primarily to maintain the status quo.

The Community Structure Approach

The community structure approach is situated in a research tradition emphasizing the role of societal structure and of external social forces in defining communication (McQuail, 1985). Operating in a structural-functionalist framework, researchers maintain that the press is not an independent social agent but an organic part of the larger social system comprising various social groups. Newspapers, therefore, tend to reflect the values and concerns of dominant groups in the communities they serve (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980, p. 217). Consequently, the media are likely to both influence and be influenced by dominant public opinion (Demers, 1996; Harry, 2001; Pollock, 2007; Smith, 1996; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980).

"Structural pluralism" was a central thesis in early community structure studies. It focuses on the influence of diversity, a key community structural attribute, on the use of news media by community members and on the role of news media in social conflicts in the community (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980). Pollock and other subsequent researchers further developed the concept of community structure to include a rich variety of features, from demographics to other aggregate measures of community identity, membership, participation and production. In a series of nationwide studies, Pollock and associates tested links between these different community features and quantitative content analyses of news coverage of a wide range of political and social issues (e.g. Pollock, 2007 & 1995; Pollock & Coughlin,1996; Pollock, Kreuer & Ouano, 1997; Pollock & Whitney, 1997).

The development of community structure research suggests that as the notion of "community" evolves from isolated rural neighborhoods consisting of homogeneous social groups to open urban societies of heterogeneous social composition, local autonomy has become a nostalgic concept. "Community issues" are increasingly defined and contested within a complex of social forces interacting in broader social contexts (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980). The media are not only sources for information but also platforms on which social conflicts play out (Huang, 2007; Pollock & Robinson, 1977; Zhao, 2008).

Conventional community structure research, however, tends to focus on news media as a mechanism of social control and to give inadequate consideration to its potential role for political and social change (Pollock, 2007). This tradition presupposes that news media reflect the values and concerns of dominant groups in the community, and therefore tend to preserve the existing norms and processes of the community (Smith, 1984; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980). Pollock (2007) argues that scholars need to pay more attention to structural or cultural changes that may propel media toward greater attention to the needs and goals of disadvantaged or repressed social groups. Indeed, access to information and knowledge through media has been associated with the ability of social actors to initiate projects promoting social change or challenging dominant powers (Pollock, 2011).

While the conventional community structure approach seeks to establish causal relationships between persistent social structural characteristics and news coverage of social issues within a functional-structuralist framework, this study aims to reposition community structure in the theoretical framework of constructionism. In a functional-structuralist framework, community structure, serving as proxies of social conditions, is thought to play a deterministic role in framing news reporting (Pollock, 2007). Within the proposed constructionism framework, however, news texts are conceptualized as a form of discourse -- a social process that is culturally and institutionally organized (van Dijk, 1991). Such discourse is the result of a cyclical process of issue framing by the media, audiences and other social forces based on their socially defined roles. Together these players construct, transmit and act on news discourse within a domain of shared beliefs and culture (Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

From this perspective, news frames are strategies of "constructing and processing news discourse or … characteristic[s] of the discourse itself" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 57). Analysis of the frames of news discourses requires an examination of ideology, culture, politics and other factors that influence the communication process (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Robinson, 2009). As such, this new perspective may effectively address criticism concerning the ''failure to examine framing contexts within wider political and social contexts." It may contribute, as a result, to our understanding of the interaction between the news media and social movements (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 214).

Online Journalism

Research on online news shows that as the Internet becomes an important source of news and information, it has significantly altered the traditional model of news production and consumption (Bozckowski, 2004; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Robinson, 2009). Although some remain skeptical about its credibility, many mainstream journalists have incorporated the Internet into their routines (Chan, Lee, & Pan, 2006; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Robinson, 2009).

More importantly, journalism in online environments becomes increasingly user-centered instead of journalist-centered. The Internet enables online news users to exchanges opinions with journalists via e-mail, present their own views of news stories on online forums, even publish their own newsletters in personal blogs. A progressively more participatory audience is playing an important role in shaping what is news, who gets to communicate about it, and how it gets covered (Bozckowski, 2004; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Robinson, 2009).

The greater interaction between the users and producers suggests that news production and consumption has changed from a one-way, asymmetric model of communication to a collective enterprise through a discursive process (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Boczkowski, 2004; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). Consequently, audiences are able to challenge the authority of journalists as gatekeepers. Journalists instead engage in "gate opening" practices that encourage user participation (Boczkowski, 2004, p. 571). By turning users into co-producers and fostering a multiplicity of information flows, the Internet has created new opportunities for the

public to enter and interpret the political world and influence the framing and setting of political agendas (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008).

In addition to the local and national emphasis of most news covered in conventional print and broadcast media, online news dissemination and consumption is often organized around online communities, defined either by common interests or geographic location or both (Boczkowski, 2004). Such online communities consist of large groups of online users linked together by network media such as Facebook and Twitter. Community members, engaging in community-bonding activities, such as sharing information and ideas and providing emotional support to each other, generate valuable social capital for civil society (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Consequently, the term "community" has become a popular metaphor for online social relationships that make up an integral part of an individual's larger social environment.

Research shows that interconnected online communities, such as densely clustered online users in the political blogosphere, may play an important role in influencing the news agenda on issues of great political concern. Online public opinion may lead to significant political consequences (Benkler, 2006; Zhao, 2008; Tai, 2006).

However, the social implications of the Internet for journalism have not been homogenous across national contexts. Social conditions and contextual characteristics necessarily mediate and shape the social implications of technological innovations. The tension between the established journalism model and new journalistic practices that the Internet affords plays out in distinct ways in different social, political and cultural settings (Chan, Lee, & Pan, 2006; He & Zhu, 2002; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009).

Mainstream News Media and Online Publics in China

Over the past 20 years, China has witnessed dramatic process of commercialization and market-oriented industrial restructuring in its press system, which was highly centralized and dominated by ideology-oriented party newspapers serving as mouthpieces for the Chinese Communist Party's national and provincial organs (Chan, et al., 2006; Chu, 1994; Lee, 2000; Zhao, 1998 & 2000). The commercial revolution of the Chinese press peaked with the proliferation of market-driven, mass-appeal, urban daily newspapers in the late 1990s (Zhao, 2008). Although still under Party supervision, these so-called "metro papers" operate with considerable financial and editorial autonomy (Lin, 2010).

Commercialization has provided the necessary institutional and economic imperatives for the market sector, represented by the metro papers, to be innovative in terms of both content and marketing. More importantly, market mechanisms have created "a general structural bias toward the value orientations and tastes of affluent urban consumers." The metro papers tend to target advertisers' most sought-after group: the young and educated population in the country's more developed urban markets (Zhao, 2008, p. 79).

Facing increasing competition, metro papers often resort to sensationalism and critical commentaries in their reporting to attract their middle class audience. Some established metro papers distinguish themselves by taking an active part in critical realms of Chinese social life. These papers are keen to take on serious social problems such as crime and corruption. In doing so, they have cultivated a professional culture and liberal

editorial orientation that often pushes the boundaries of what is politically permissible in China's current political environment. As a result, some metro papers such as *Nanfang Metropolitan Newspaper* (*NMN*) have become both market successes and outspoken opinion leaders in China's public communication (Zhao, 2008).

  The Internet arose as a news medium at the historical juncture of the erosion of party journalism and the growth of the market sector, leading to an increasingly decentralized and fragmented Chinese press. China now boasts the world's largest online population, and Chinese Internet users are keen to seek news and information online (CNNIC, 2011). Social and political information is widely distributed and discussed on news portals and online forums. As a relatively open environment, the Internet represents an emerging virtual "public sphere" for Chinese netizens, who have become the surrogate "public" in Chinese public communication (Yang 2003; Zhao, 2008).

  China's active online public, however, is a peculiar one. Zhao (2008) observes that it consists of "leading humanistic intellectuals who have access to mainstream print media but aim to enlarge the Chinese public sphere, young university faculty members, social critics, …white-collar workers, and …university students" (Zhao, 2008, p.305). Zhao's depiction fits CNNIC's statistical profile of Chinese Internet users. Its survey data consistently show that a typical Chinese Internet user is likely to be between 20 and 35 years old with some college education (CNNIC, 2009).

  Zhao (2008) further argues that this online population mediates between the merging ruling classes and their allies among the social elite on the one hand, and the underclasses composed of the rural peasants and the urban poor on the other. Due to volatility brought about by the country's ongoing market reforms in employment, housing and health care, this particular social group faces a precarious socio-economic future of its own. Consequently, many urban youth have come to share concerns similar to those of China's underclasses. They are vulnerable to the drawbacks of the party-state's authoritarian regime, such as corruption, ineffective public services and arbitrary government administrative power. Most of them, therefore, are committed to social justice and motivated to speak on behalf of unprivileged social groups. Equipped with discursive and symbolic resources, these socially engaged individuals are the core participants in online public debates of social issues (Zhao, 2008).

  In contrast, China's ruling party has an ambivalent relationship with the Internet as a news medium. On the one hand, it welcomes the economic benefits the Internet bestows (Chan, et al, 2006; Zhao, 2008); all major party-organ newspapers have online presence. On the other hand, the government, wary of the potential political consequences, exerts effective control over the new medium. For instance, commercial news portals in China are prohibited from gathering news on their own, thus can only relay news from the established news outlets.

  Commercialization, structural diversification and technological developments, therefore, did not completely stamp out party journalism in China. The party principles of media production remain essential in China's press system (Chan et al, 2006; Lee, 2000; Zhao, 2008). As a result, journalism in China is being practiced amid tensions among continued party control (Chan, 1995), market competition (Zhao, 1998), diverse professional ideals of different ideational systems (Lin, 2010; Zhao, 2008), and the need to adapt to new technologies such as the Internet (Chan et al., 2006; He & Zhu, 2002).

Under the influence of these complex factors, the press in China has evolved into two distinct yet institutionally intertwined sectors: the party-organ sector, which traces its roots to the communist ideology, and the market-oriented mass-appeal sector represented by metro papers (Zhao, 2008). The two sectors have very different target readers, who differ in terms of their demographics, class identity, ideology, and their roles in news production. Therefore, instead of characterizing communities within their geographical boundaries, this study describes the structural features of the two press sectors in terms of the characteristics of their target readers. Table 1 summarizes the community structures of the two kinds of newspapers.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Research Question and Method

Discourse Analysis of News Frames

The objective of this study is to apply the community structure approach to the study of journalism in the context of China's contemporary social and technological environment. It is designed to examine how news texts as discourse are constructed in the discursive interplay between party journalism, the market sector represented by the metro papers, and their online urban readers. As metro papers clearly differ from party papers in jounalistic orientation, it is reasonable to expect variation in reporting on controversial issues by the two types of journalism. Hence, the key research question of this study is:

RQ: How do these differences in the community structures affect the news coverage by party-organ newspapers and market-orientated newspapers represented by metro papers?

The expected variation leads logically to a methodology that is sensitive to that variation. This study conducts an analysis on news narrative. It

takes note of the events and anecdotes in stories (what is in them and what is left out) as well as overall plot development (how, in what order and with what language, the story is told, how it opens, how its conflict is established and resolved, and how it ends) and characterization (who, within the story structure, emerges as the most salient players and how they interact) (Kitch & Hume, 2008, p. xvi).

The analysis aims to systematically identify frames used in the news narratives. A frame is a central organizing idea that connects different signifying elements and devices such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions and visual images in a news discourse. These elements and devices are organized to "set up parameters of a cognitive 'window' through which a news story is 'seen'" (Entman and Rojecki; 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 59).

In addition, a discourse analysis was conducted to determine the influence of societal values, ideology, politics, and other social factors influencing overall expression in communication. Framing judgments by the journalists were evaluated in the context of their social relationship with the readers and the changing standards, principles and practices of the Chinese press system introduced in the previous section.

The Case

A fire in a 28-story apartment building in downtown Shanghai on November 15, 2010, killed 58 people and wounded another 120. The building, surrounded by scaffolding and safety nets, was under renovation when the fire started.

The news coverage of the fire evolved into two phases over the course of its development. In the initial phase, the press focused on reporting when, where, what and why of the event. The differences in the coverage by the two types of papers were most evident in problem definition and causal attribution. In the second phase, the week after the fire, reports focused on spontaneous massive mourning activities by city residents and the online community.

The Data

The data were collected from two online news portals: jfdaily.com and nfdaily.cn. The former hosts *Jiefang Daily* (JFD), the party-organ newspaper in Shanghai. The latter hosts three metro dailies: *Nanfang Metropolitan Newspaper* (NMN) based in Guangzhou, *Xinjing Newspaper* (XJN) in Beijing, *Yunnan Information Newspaper* (YIN) in Yunnan. All these metro papers belong to the Nanfang Newspaper Group, which is affiliated with the Guangdong provincial party organ. These metro papers are able to write critical reports on affairs in Shanghai because their party affiliation is above the political jurisdiction of Shanghai municipal authorities. This is also the reason that local urban dailies in Shanghai were not included in the study: Shanghai authorities is likely to limit their coverage of the case. The two online portals carry all the articles from the papers as well as electronic replicas of their original prints. The data, spanning a two-week period, included all 56 news items about the fire on JFD and 53 items from the metro papers.

The author conducted parallel analyses of the news narratives of the two types of newspapers to contrast their patterns and frames of the coverage. The analysis was organized chronologically because the important frames varied with the development of the case. The accompanying discourse analysis contextualized the observed framing differences and traced them to the relevant factors in the broader social environment.

The Analysis

The Initial Stage

All newspapers began their coverage of the fire on the morning of November 16th, the next day. Given the magnitude of the fire and its severe casualties, all papers granted importance to the case in their coverage. In the earliest stages, their reporting helped convey the facts about the fire and draw national attention. However, as the case gathered attention, the frames of coverage diverged.

Jiefang Daily (JFD). JFD presented six lengthy stories and photos in its two-page *Headline News* section on the 16th. It led with the front-page headline ''*In Shanghai for the rescue and relief work, Meng Jianzhu Requires Sparing No Efforts to Search for Survivors, Tend for the Wounded, and Investigate the Cause*" (JFD, November 16, 2010). The item, provided by the official Xinhua News Agency, detailed the speeches and activities by Meng, China's Minister of Public Security and the leader of the team sent by

the State Council to Shanghai to investigate the cause of the fire and oversee the relief work. Next to it was a piece, similarly entitled, summarizing the activities of Shanghai municipal officials. Accompanying these two items was a shorter piece providing the time, place and casualties of the fire and the current status of the rescue work.

This set of news items was organized in a classic party journalist structure: although it was the severity of the fire that rendered the story newsworthy, JFD's coverage was anchored on the government response at the national and local levels, hierarchically emphasizing the rescue efforts and positive effects of such efforts. Speeches and activities by the government officials were provided as evidence for such positive effects.

On the second page of *Headline News* section, three items detailed the rescue efforts by the local authorities, firefighters, hospitals and neighborhood volunteers. These items involved more storytelling by the reporters. Activities and words of ordinary people were featured. But the overall tone was consistent with the theme set on the front page. Readers were assured that brave firefighters risked their lives in search of survivors in the burning building and that the survivors were provided with immediate food and temporary lodging and tended by caring volunteers and doctors.

Together these articles formed a coherent theme -- a systematic frame of reference stringing together the signifying elements to present a coherent discourse of the story that serves particular purposes. This unifying theme centered upon the prompt and dependable government response and the efficient and orderly rescue. Many of the facts that supported this theme came from the established authorities, such as government officials, the local firefighter squads and hospitals. These syntactical and thematic characteristics reify the role of party journalism, represented by JFD, as the spokesperson of the Party to maintain social stability, or "social harmony," in a disturbing event.

Similar frames and theme continued throughout the two-week coverage of the case by JFD. Its reporters blanketed the newspaper with stories emphasizing the positive side of the case. The subjects of the coverage ranged from a nationwide drive to tighten fire and safety inspections at buildings and construction sites, compensation for the victims' families, donations and volunteers from the community and other parts of the country, efforts to recover property remaining in the building, psychological help for the victims, sleep-deprived doctors working to save the wounded, to monks reciting sūtras for the dead at a local temple.

The metro papers. The metro papers repeated a number of the Xinhua News Agency's pegs, such as Meng's activities, in their early coverage. But their overall coverage presented a more layered and complex news narrative of the fire by incorporating accounts of local residents and witnesses, editorial commentaries, syndicated opinion columns and online comments. Journalists and the online community jointly disseminated, gatekeeped, and reoriented the news discourse, which broadened, questioned, and even challenged the official discourse.

NMN featured brief on-the-scene interviews with the residents of the burning building in its earliest reports on the 16th. A male resident, Mr. Zhou, who had a near escape from the fire, told a story about how he and his wife tried to escape by climbing down the scaffolding outside the building from their 23rd floor apartment. The report ended with the sentence "Mr. Zhou said he hadn't found his wife yet. He had no idea what was going on with her." Narratives like this offered the readers more realistic

glimpses of the disturbing and chaotic fire scene. In a report the next day, NMN had a section about a conference on "citywide fire prevention and workplace safety" held by the local authorities. Chen Fei, the head of the Shanghai fire department, provided information on the ongoing rescue efforts in the conference. NMN organized his words under two subject titles in the form of a question, "Why did the fire get out of control?" and "Why did it take four hours to put it out?" This way, Chen's words were framed as "official responses" to the interrogations of the reporter on behalf of the readers.

The same day, XJN had an editorial titled "*The Fire Should not be a Painful Loss Only for Shanghai.*'' It went: "It should be a heart-felt loss for all of us. The relief work for the Shanghai fire should not only include consoling the survivors and their families, finding the truth, and disciplining those responsible. In addition, we need to pay attention to the profound socio-psychological repercussions. It takes genuine reflections and measures to alleviate the social anxiety it caused." The paper's emphasis on "the painful loss" and "the social anxiety" was in stark contrast to the positive and harmonious theme on JFD. A YIN commentary, titled "*The Shanghai Fire: The Building Serves as a Pillory Admonishing Later People*" took issue with the artificial positivity in the official coverage of the fire. It went on saying: "…However, when we saw the messages and pictures sent by netizens, the "'citizen journalists', via microblogs and QQ, our hearts burn in fire too" (YIN, November 22, 2010). YIN provided more witnesses' accounts of "the burning truth" in a later report (YIN, November 23, 2010). It quoted local residents and witnesses questioning the delayed response of a local fire squad stationed a block away and the late arrival of adequate equipment. Amidst such accounts, the report also reminded the readers of a comprehensive fire extinguisher exercise aimed at high-rise fires in the city a week ago. The successful exercise, the paper pointed out, was to prove to the public the capability and confidence of local authorities to prevent such incidents.

The metro papers, in their choice of interview subjects, framing of headlines and critical commentaries, developed a narrative that differed from the JDF's version built of comforting facts. Their conscious attention to emotions, conflicts, drama and action was combined with a critical stance toward the official viewpoints. This is the signature style that enables them to win over their urban readers.

Bigger discrepancies developed in themes and styles of the two types papers when the event evolved into the causal attribution stage (Entman, 1993). Following its report on Meng and his team's arrival in Shanghai to take charge of the investigation on November 16, JFD announced the preliminary results the next day. The paper stated that welding sparks caused by "unlicensed welders" improperly operating their equipment spread to bamboo scaffolding and nylon nets shrouding the building and led to the blaze. Four welders were arrested (JFD, November 17, 2010). The embedded message of the report was clear: the fire was an accident with a purely technical cause.

The metro papers went in a different direction. YIN took the lead by publishing two pieces digging into the construction project itself. After exposing that it was a government project, YIN openly raised questions about the lack of information about the nature of the 30,000,000 RMB renovation contract and the obscure contractor (YIN November 16 & 17, 2010). XJN's report on the same topic was titled "*The Contractor Got the Bid Despite its Poor Safety Record. High-ranking Government Officials were said to be Involved*." However, YIN did not provide any concrete evidence (XJN,

November 18, 2010). In a later YIN report, the mayor was quoted saying "Poor supervision of the city's construction industry was one of the major causes of the fire. And we are responsible for that." YIN ran the piece with a rather exaggerated headline: "*Mayor Han Zheng: The City Administration Bears Inescapable Responsibility for the Fire*" (YIN, November 23, 2010). The report went on to say, "Among the dead were not only the residents but also the 'peasant workers' [migrating workers from the country side] working on the construction site… They were victims of the fire too. But they were totally forgotten and even became the scapegoats for the fire."

Rumors of corruption among city officials and public outcry about the arrest of the welders (peasant workers) were running wild online as these reports were published. For the metro papers and the online readers, the preliminary conclusion by the government did not pay adequate attention to the mismanagement and the lack of supervision of the construction project by the government. Their suspicions and distrust of the official conclusion in this case was just another manifestation of their antagonistic stance towards the overbearing and arbitrary administrative power.

In summary, there was a clear difference in judgments made in the course of selecting and conveying information about (i.e., framing) the fire by the journalists of the two types of papers. JFD reporters built a "web of facticity," ordered and substantiated by authoritative sources and nestled into frames that were designed to calm public anxieties while maintaining the status quo (Robinson, 2009, p. 404). The metro papers, on the other hand, more clearly identified themselves with the perspective of the readers in their reporting and actively moralized about the official discourse in their commentaries. They also acted as the mouthpiece of the online community, putting the official stance on the defensive and countering it with witnesses' accounts, and in expressing sympathy for the treatment of the peasant workers. Their perspective differed much from party journalism where negative outlooks were rare and muted.

The Second Stage

The second stage began when the mourning period of local residents started a few days after the fire, climaxing on November 21, a week after the fire. According to the Chinese tradition, the seventh day after death is when the soul of the dead returns to bid farewell to its family before departing forever. The 21st happened to fall on a Saturday. More than 100,000 people came to the site to pay homage to the dead during the day. Metro papers took the lead in this phase. With many more reports, commentaries, photos and readers' comments, their coverage was much more intensive than that of JFD.

The metro papers covered the mourning scene in detail. They noted that mourners came from all over the city, some from other parts of the country. Many brought flowers on behalf of others. At one point, the line queuing up to lay flowers in front of the building stretched several blocks. Photos showed a sea of flowers surrounding the pictures of the dead and weeping family members in front of the charred building.

These details not only described an emotionally charged spontaneous mass spectacle but also provided a variety of pegs on which the papers could hang their frames. The reports were replete with references to the prayers, tears, sorrow, silence, order and most of all, the flowers. Accompanying editorial commentaries took these symbols and turned them into metaphors infused with political meanings.

The frequently recurring metaphor of the flowers came to exemplify the framing judgments by the metro papers on the solidarity and rationality of the putatively emotional mourners. The community may have suffered a devastating loss, but they gained strength from the unity of the community. Therefore, the flowers were a symbol of celebration of the dignity and solidarity of the community. More importantly, the flowers carried a strong message from a broader "public," online and offline, demanding "the truth" about the fire from the government. One XJN editorial said: "What do you hear those flowers saying? …The dedication of the flowers by people was a sign of sympathy for their fellow residents and the beginning of their rational pursuit for truth. It is a spontaneous act by people acting as not only residents but also citizens mobilizing to participate in the push for better governance" (XJN, November, 22, 2010).

The metro papers' coverage strongly resonated with an online community, which played an instrumental role in the event. Many reports, in various ways, took note of the mourning activities taking place simultaneously online. XJN, for instance, quoted in one story some widely circulating tweets. These and similar messages were read and retweeted by millions of netizens across the country (XJN, November, 22):

@jd: Today, Shanghainese, in their own way, showed us the strength behind their calm appearances.
@lr: Salute to Shanghai! Heard the Tangshan earthquake on radio; Watched the tsunami on TV; Read the Wenchuan earthquake on blogs; Saw Shanghai on microblog.
@cj: At this moment, we are a family.

In fact, online communities have always been a critical part of the metro papers' reporting. Both NMN and XJN have regular columns specifically dedicated to comments on Chinese microblogging sites. Moreover, the community formed in the wake of the fire did not confine its activities to the web. Metro papers told stories of netizens, organized via the Internet, bringing flowers and distributing them free to the mourners. Comments and activities such as these, representing "public opinion" actively voiced and enacted by the community, served as not only the sources of the metro papers' framing judgments but also as testimonies showing how the metro papers served as mouthpieces for the community. In a sense, the metro papers played the role of liaison connecting the offline with the online worlds, thus expanding the community to a national scale. In doing so, the metro papers gained support and legitimacy for their position in confronting the existing power relation. Here the news texts, as a set of systematically structured signifying elements, "both indicate the advocacy of certain ideas and provide devices to encourage certain kinds of audience processing of the texts" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 56). As such, the news discourse on the fire is a result of a recursive process based on a partnership between the journalists of the metro papers and their audience.

Moreover, some metro paper reporters openly embraced the values of the community and explicitly considered themselves to be members of the community. One XJN reporter wrote "After I returned to the hotel on the night of the 18th to write the report, I told my online friends that I did the most important thing I came here to do – dedicating flowers to the victims in the name of a citizen" (XJN, November 20, 2010). In a fragmented, personalized, and dramatized style, accounts like this conveyed to the

community that the reporters, as participants in the event and members of the community, identified with the community's values. These frames also demonstrated that the coverage was driven less by objective news developments than by the papers' own value orientation. The shared value system is the common ground for both the journalists and the community to come together in constructing, disseminating and responding to the news discourse.

The discourse of the metro papers, rooted in judgments of rationality and unity, granted legitimacy to the event that had little institutionalized political power. It was staked out to distinguish the spontaneous mass action of the community and public from that of the officials. The editorial combination of commentaries penned by liberal intellectuals and comments by online readers articulated a notion of public interest and argued for transparency, justice, and the value of public participation. As a result, an emerging liberal citizen rights discourse eventually became the metro papers and online community's dominant theme in the coverage of the fire. The terms "civil society" and "citizen" served as catchphrases in many of the stories and commentaries. By invoking the rhetoric of civil society, a term for "a more or less organized public realm for the protection of the rights of citizens and the construction of civic values, sometimes through collective protest," the papers created and promoted the meaning of the event initiated by the community (Yang, 2002, p. 2).

In contrast, JFD limited its coverage of the event to one day, the 22nd only. The headline of its two-page coverage focused on the participation by the local officials, including the mayor. The second piece on the front page briefly described the scene of orderly crowds and the flower dedication, but then went on to describe how local administrative agencies at the various levels worked hard to provide needed services and maintain order for the event participants. Other items on the second page provided emotional details of activities by the mourners. Overall, the central theme was still that the community, under the responsible leadership of the government, had come together to heal (JFD, November 22, 2010). One JFD commentary was titled "*Great Prospects await Civic Organizations*" (JFD, November 20, 2010). The article, in small font buried in a corner on p. 12, acknowledged that NGOs played a positive role in disaster relief and appealed for their acknowledgment. Using the term "civic organization" instead of the more sensitive term "civil society" employed by the metro papers, the piece reflected the ambivalent government stance towards the emerging self-organizing mechanisms in society.

Discussion

Media reforms and commercialization have resulted in an increasingly decentralized and fragmented press system in China. The rise of the market sector, mainly comprising metro papers catering to urban young middle-class readers, indicates the development of an alternative journalism model that differs from the propaganda model of party journalism. Together the two models constitute a complex of differentiated discursive fields in China's public communication (Huang, 2007; Zhao, 2008).

In spite of the recent changes, there is still little room for the "old mainstream" party papers to step outside fixed news reporting structures and rhetoric laid down in

accordance with the principles of party journalism (Pugsley, 2006). Operating as self-interested economic entities, the "new mainstream" commercial metro papers, on the other hand, are politically liberal and socially committed to push the boundaries of news discourse (Zhao, 2008). The new development is accompanied and perhaps explained by China's transition from a totalitarian to a fragmented authoritarian political system (Tai, 2006). In the case study presented here, for instance, the metro papers were able to question and challenge the official discourse of the local administration in reporting the fire because of their affiliation with a political branch that is beyond the jurisdiction of Shanghai city administration.

The analysis demonstrates that the metro papers, propelled by market incentives, often rely on dramatized and personalized tabloid approaches to cater to the market. In addition, they regularly employ critical perspectives to construct news discourses that appeal to the liberal intellectual community and their civic-minded urban readers, who are acutely concerned with official corruption and social injustice. More importantly, the alternative discourse of the metro papers in this case was the result of a joint venture between the journalists and the intellectual and online communities. This convergence of news production and consumption suggests a renegotiation of the news paradigm in accommodating an emerging participatory model (Robinson, 2009).

Metro papers' young and educated readers, constituting an economically less privileged but socially progressive segment of the urban middle social strata, represent a nascent civil society in China, characterized by the expansion of individual rights and urban public spaces, and the growth of voluntary associational life via online communities (Yang, 2003). These social dynamics have provided favorable conditions for the growth of metro newspapers. The commercial press, in turn, advocate community citizenship rights in terms of security against arbitrary administrative power and corruption, a cause that urban citizens fully indentify with.

Conclusion

This study adapts and applies the community structure model to the study of online journalism in a complex social environment. The chosen case is situated in China's contemporary social environment featuring the restructuring of social relationships, the fragmented press structure, the social implications of the Internet, and the development of a civil society. It reveals how an alternative news discourse by the commercial press and its online community intersects with party journalism at the local and national levels in face of government control of media. It provides glimpses of "the specific ways in which different social forces and different kinds of power--political, economic, social and cultural--operate within and through the media and the Internet to shape the course of China's transformation" (Zhao, 2008, p. 245).

In addition, this study suggests the need to reconfigure the traditional news paradigm to make room for a new participatory journalist model. This emerging new model contrasts to the classic "objective" model or alternative models such as the "guard dog" model that emphasizes media's role in reinforcing dominant social groups (Pollock, 2007). This participatory model emerges from the greater interaction between journalists and audiences. It signifies that news production and consumption has evolved from a one-way, linear model of communication to a collaborative project through a discursive

process in China's contemporary news environment.

More importantly, this study proposed a new theoretical approach, under the rubric of constructionism, to community structure analysis. In this new framework, the social world consists of varied potential realities. As we choose to display, omit or interpret a news event differently, the definition, causes and consequences of the event may become very different (Entman, 1993). Within this framework, news texts are conceptualized as a form of discourse that is socially and culturally organized. Unlike the traditional approach to content analysis, this approach does not presume objectively identifiable meanings or frames inherent in news texts. Rather, it regards news texts as composed of organized symbolic devices that will interact with readers on a socio-psychological level for meaning construction (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Frame schemes of the discourse are central to political persuasion on public issues by the media, which may systematically align with a certain social group and act as its advocate for specific political beliefs (Pollock, 2007). News discourse is an essential part of the cyclical process of issue framing by the media, audiences and other social forces.

Methodologically, this study employs qualitative framing and discourse analysis, which present a holistic and deep characterization of community structure. The "structure" of the community, a social group that is politically vocal and active both online and offline, is gauged by its demographic characteristics and shared social and cultural values. The qualitative analysis of news texts provides a richer perspective than the simplistic categorization of news texts as "positive" or "negative," ''biased'' or ''objective,'' in existing community structure studies. Table 2 summarizes the major differences between the traditional community structure framework and the constructionist model proposed in this study. In light of the changing nature of journalism in the Internet era, this new constructionist approach to community structure conceivably provides a fresh perspective for the study of journalism and society.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

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Table 1 The Community Structures of Jiefang Daily and the Three Metro Dailies

Structural Characteristic	Party Organ (Jiefang Daily)	Three Metropolitan Dailies
Daily Circulation	550,000	2,706,600 (combined)
Demographic Variation	Shanghai	Major metropolitan areas (combined)
Age	65.07% above 45 years old	66.29% between 25-44 years old (average)
Education Level (in percent completing college)	39.7%	61.63% (average)
Reader Orientation	Party officials Ruling elites	Liberal intellectuals Urban middle class
Ideology	Official	Liberal
Role in news production	Dissemination of official agendas	Civic participation

Table 2 The community structure approaches

Dimension	Traditional	New
Theoretical roots	Structural-Functionalist	Constructionist
Focal problematics	The role of the press to maintain the social status quo	The role of the press for social change
Direction of influence	The deterministic role of society on journalism	A discursive process playing out between the press, relevant social groups, and news consumers
Conceptualization of community structure	Static proxies of social conditions in which the newspapers operate	Demographic characteristics and shared social and cultural values of the social group with which the newspapers interact
Operationalization of community structure	Geographically defined, Quantitative	Reader-oriented, Qualitative