

HOW NEW IS ONLINE NEWS? ONLINE NEWS SERVICES IN CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA*

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As use of the Internet has become progressively widespread in China and South Korea, so too has it assumed an increasingly prominent role within the political processes of both countries. Over recent years in China, there have been numerous examples of the Internet being used to facilitate the mass dissemination of politically-sensitive information, circumventing traditional methods of information control and effectively exercising an agenda setting power that necessitates a response by the Party-State.¹ At the same time, the Internet has also become a key medium which the Chinese Communist Party has sought to utilise to guide the content and direction of public political discourse. In South Korea, the Internet has been at the centre of several recent, notable civil society campaigns and has also been adopted by South Korean political candidates, their parties and supporters as an important promotional tool, sometimes to great electoral effect.²

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¹ One prominent example is the breaking of the news blackout on the spread of the SARS virus in 2003. By being able to access and distribute information about the virus online, a critical-mass of public opinion contributed to a reversal in the Government's policy of maintaining a news blackout of the epidemic. Hung, C.-f. (2006). The Politics of Cyber Participation in the PRC: The Implication of Contingency for the Awareness of Citizens' Rights. *Issues and Studies*, 42(4), 137-173. p. 152. In another case, the Internet was used to publicise the illegal manufacture of fireworks in a Jiangxi school that led to the explosion and death of numerous teachers and students. See Barmé, G. R., & Davies, G. (2004). Have We Been Noticed Yet? Intellectual Contestation and the Chinese Web. In E. Gu & M. Goldman (Eds.), *Chinese Intellectuals Between State and Market* (pp. 79-108). London: Routledge Curzon. p. 77

² 2002 was a landmark year which signalled the emergence of the Internet in Korean politics. Roh Moo-hyun's election as President in that year was seen by many as being decisively aided by the extensive Internet-based fundraising, promotion and advertising that supported his campaign, leading

While these and other high-profile political developments have attracted considerable academic and broader interest, it is valuable to consider the role of the Internet “..beyond the narrow scope of overt political protest and obvious political change.”³ Examining the daily practice of Internet-mediated political communication and how it contributes to public political communication in both China and South Korea may be more effective in helping to predict the longer-term political impact of this medium in both countries. The nature and characteristics of political information mediated by online news services represents a pertinent starting point for such an analysis. Surveys of Internet use in both countries have consistently shown that accessing online sources of news information is one of the most popular activities amongst Internet users.⁴ As online news services represent a particularly frequent and commonplace mode of online political communication, this paper will analyse the emergence of online news services in their respective national contexts, before discussing the results of a qualitative analysis of a variety of online news sources in both countries in order to address this papers central question: what are the characteristics of this type of political communication and how will online news services contribute to the evolution of public political discourse in both countries?

Chinese and Korean Online News Services in Context

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have argued persuasively for the need to temper expectations about Internet-driven political transformation by recognising the extent to which the forces of globalised communication overlap and rest on the traditional

to him being dubbed Korea’s first “Internet President”. Chang, W.-y., & Lee, W.-t. (2006). Cyberactivism and Political Empowerment in Civil Society. *Korea Journal*, 46(4), 137-167. p. 160. Also in 2002, Korean online activists coordinated the massive civil demonstrations which were held to protest against the US Government after a US army tank crushed to death two Korean schoolgirls. Kim, Y.-c., & Kim, K.-s. (2006). Online Storytellers: Blogging in South Korea. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 7(1), 9-16. p. 10.

³ MacKinnon, R. (2008). Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China. *Public Choice*, 134, 31-46. p. 45.

⁴ See for Korea and China respectively, National Internet Development Agency of Korea - Survey on Computer and Internet Usage - Executive Summary [Electronic (2007). Version]. Retrieved 15/02/2008 from <http://isis.nida.or.kr/eng/>., CNNIC - July 2007 Statistical Report on Internet Development in China [Electronic (2007). Version]. Retrieved 1/02/2008 from <http://www.cnnic.cn/en/index/00/index.htm>.

world where power depends on geographically based institutions.⁵ It is a theme further developed by James Curran and Myung-Jin Park in their comparative study of the influential role still played by national media systems and regulatory frameworks in determining the nature of mediated communication in different countries.⁶

Recognising that communicative technologies such as the Internet are both shaped by as well as shaping societies, it is appropriate that this study should begin by situating online news services within their respective national contexts.

In China, online news services form part of the tightly controlled and regulated Chinese news media system. Traditionally, this system has served as the loyal ‘mouthpiece’ (*houshe*) of the Communist Party, tasked with inculcating ideologically correct views and mobilising the masses in the service of party-state initiatives. More recently, while the essential political goal of the preservation of Party control remains unchanged, the Chinese news media is no longer required to dominate all aspects of public discourse, but merely those deemed politically sensitive or significant. This more targeted role is reflected in two terms commonly associated with the political goals of the Chinese news media: ‘thought work’ (*sixiang gongzuo*) and the ‘guidance of public opinion’ (*yulun daoxiang*). Pursuing these goals, however, has been complicated by several changes to the broader Chinese media environment in recent years.

While the Party-State in the reform era has retained a tight grip over the dissemination of political news, the reporting of local affairs, lifestyle matters, fashion, travel, sports, entertainment and other ‘soft content’ now proceeds with little or no state interference.⁷ Political journalism has therefore been conducted with a greater awareness of the need to make ‘correct’ political news and opinions more palatable to consumers by structuring it in more attractive ways or by balancing its presentation with more engaging, non-political information. The news media’s task of ‘guiding public opinion’ has also become problematic owing to the recent availability of blogs and online discussion forums which have come to function as de-facto news providers,

⁵ Keohane, R., & Nye, J. S. (1998). Power and Interdependence in the Information Age. *Foreign Affairs*, 77(5), 81-94. p. 82

⁶ Curran, J., & Park, M.-j. (2000). Beyond Globalization Theory. In J. Curran & M.-j. Park (Eds.), *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (pp. 3-18). London: Routledge. p. 14.

⁷ Ma, E. K.-w. (2000). Rethinking Media Studies: The Case of China. In J. Curran & M.-j. Park (Eds.), *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (pp. 21-34). London: Routledge. p. 26

depriving state-run media of the ability to always set the news agenda by completely excluding or suppressing issues from public discussion. Party anxiety over the loss of complete control over the media agenda is reflected in official party publications and journals where Party scholars consider the Party's loss of information supremacy, the Internet's pluralisation of information sources and the resulting need to update traditional 'thought work' methods to deal with this challenge.⁸

In contrast to this, within South Korea's democratic political framework, the news media system is a relatively unfettered institution of public communication, intended to function as an important public space within which the exchange and contestation of political ideas may occur. The extent to which this role is fulfilled, however, is a point of some contention among many Korean media studies scholars. Many claim that the dominant, mainstream news media companies, as coopted partners of authoritarian governments during the pre-democratic period, retain the conservative ideological biases and vested factional interests of that time.⁹ Since democratisation, the continuing conservative bias in the mainstream news media is seen as reflecting the inability of a deregulated economic market to effectively pluralise these conservative institutions or make them more representative.¹⁰ In short, the state of much of the mainstream news media is seen as symptomatic of Korea's transition to a form of procedural rather than fully substantive democracy, within which power continues to be concentrated in conservative-dominated institutions of public communication that fail to reflect the views of broader Korean society.

Within this broader media context, while many of the South Korean online news services launched over the past decade or so have predominantly commercial objectives, there has also been a notable proliferation of news sites established to

⁸ See, for example, Tao, C. (2007). The Impact of the Internet and the Modernisation of Political Thought Work (*Hulianwang chongji yu sixiang zhengzhi gongzuo de yushi jujin*). *Lilun Tansuo*, 2(164), 73-74. Huo, Y., & Li, Y. (2007). The Development of the Internet and the Challenge Faced by Political Thought Work (*Hulianwang fazhan yu sixiang zhengzhi gongzuo mianlin de tiaozhan*). *Lilun Tansuo*, 3(165), 65-67. Liu, X. (2005). Correctly Recognize and Reply to the Influence of Internet on Ideological and Political Work (*Zhengque renshi he yingdui hulianwang dui sixiang zhengzhi gongzuo de yingxiang*). *Tianjinshi Caimao Guanli Ganbu Xueyuan Xuebao*, 2, 45-46.

⁹ See, for example, Choi, J.-j. (2005). *Democracy After Democratization - The Korean Experience*. Seoul: Humanitas. p. 15. Also, Yang, S.-M. (2002). The Media Tax Probe and Media Reform in South Korea. *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, 6(1), 31-36. p. 33.

¹⁰ Kang, M.-k. (2005). The Struggle for Press Freedom and Emergence of "Unelected" Media Power in South Korea. In J. N. Erni & S. K. Chua (Eds.), *Asian Media Studies: Politics of Subjectivities* (pp. 75-90). Malden: Blackwell Publishing. p. 80.

explicitly challenge Korea's conservative media order. For many political activists and concerned citizens, online news services and the Internet generally, are envisaged as capable of facilitating more robust and diverse political discourse and thus “..overcome the pre-existing limitations of public sphere discussion.”¹¹

Analysing Online News Coverage: the North Korean Nuclear Test

In this paper, the October 2006 North Korean nuclear test was chosen as a case study to assess the nature and characteristics of different online news services in both countries. A qualitative analysis of coverage of the nuclear test was conducted by selecting a total of one-hundred and twenty-five news articles with ‘nuclear test’ (*he shiyan / haek silhöm*) in the headline from the archives of five different online news sites. Articles were selected by date in order to get a sample of coverage that was spread fairly evenly over the course of the month of October, with articles whose content was deemed tangential to the issue of the nuclear test being removed from the sample. Among the five sources of online news analysed, two were Chinese (the *People's Daily Online* and *QQ.com*) while three were Korean (*Chosun.com*, *Naver* and *OhmyNews*). The *People's Daily Online* was selected as it is the flagship of China's state- run media system and one of the most prominent sources of national and international news on the Chinese-language web. *QQ.com* was selected on the basis of it being China's most popular commercial Internet portal which offers users a variety of services, including news.¹² *Chosun.com*, was selected because it is the online version of the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, one of Korea's most influential and dominant conservative media institutions. *Naver*, like *QQ.com*, is a commercial Internet portal and the most popular website in Korea. Amongst its many services, *Naver* also offers up to date news information. Finally, *OhmyNews* was selected on the basis of it being Korea's best known citizen journalist website. *OhmyNews* allows registered users, known as ‘news guerrillas’, to contribute news articles where, once they are approved by *OhmyNews*' professional editors, they are published on the *OhmyNews* website.

¹¹ Paek, S.-k. (2003). *Political Discussion and the Internet (Chöngch'i Tamron kwa Intönet)*. Seoul: Communication Books. p. 36.

¹² Claimed on company website and supported by data from Internet traffic monitoring service, Alexa.com

Chinese Coverage:

The North Korean nuclear test represented a significant blow to the Chinese-sponsored Six-Party Talks and, having invested several years in resolving the issue through this framework, was also a blow to Chinese prestige.¹³ However, while a setback for Chinese foreign policy, the state-run media coverage analysed in the sample contained no obvious factual distortions or omissions of pertinent facts from its coverage in an attempt to control public political discourse. Solid argumentation and reasoning was present throughout the articles featured on the *People's Daily Online* and *QQ.com* websites.

For example, North Korean claims of needing a nuclear weapon to protect itself from foreign attack were rejected by noting the security guarantees given by other nations participating in the Six-Party Talks and by referring to the content of previous Joint Declarations produced by these negotiations. The frank assessment that the test was in fact carried out by North Korea as a way of increasing its bargaining power within the Six-Party Talks was instead offered as a likely explanation. The relatively-free nature of Chinese coverage was also reflected in the wide variety of reactions to the test, albeit mainly those that occurred at an official or government level, that were presented. Reactions from governments and leaders from all the nations participating in the Six-Party talks, including North Korea, were presented frequently and in significant detail, while statements from other interested parties such as NATO, the IAEA, Brazil, Australia, Italy and others were also featured.

Despite these aspects of coverage which pointed toward an even-handed reporting of the nuclear test, other features identified within the Chinese samples indicated that Party-State interests were still exercising an important influence over the nature of coverage. One of the obvious characteristics displayed in Chinese samples was the uniformity in content between the two news sources analysed. Not only were many of the *QQ.com* articles originally sourced from the *People's Daily Online*, but many phrases, quotes and other aspects of content were repeated throughout the Chinese samples. There appears to have been a strict adherence by *QQ.com* to Chinese

¹³ Snyder, S. (2007). Responses to North Korea's Nuclear Test: Capitulation or Collective Action? *The Washington Quarterly*, 30(9), 33-43. p. 36.

Internet regulations which stipulate that private providers of news information must only disseminate news drawn from state-run sources.¹⁴ This consistency between both sources of Chinese online news allowed for the identification of three distinct themes that appeared in both the *People's Daily Online* and *QQ.com* articles.

The first common theme identified in Chinese coverage was the strong and unequivocal condemnation of the test by the Chinese Government. An official Chinese government statement quoted in several articles within the sample asserted that, "North Korea has disregarded the opposition of international society and flagrantly conducted a nuclear test." The term used in this statement, *hanran*, meaning flagrantly, was seen as significant in that it is usually reserved for China's enemies or rivals, having previously been employed when the Japanese Prime Minister visited the Yakusuni Shrine or when the US bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.¹⁵ The language employed to condemn North Korea was also notable for its blunt nature and uncharacteristic lack of diplomatic ambiguity. One article noted that after the test, "...not only had the Joint Declaration brought about through painstaking effort by Chinese diplomats become a piece of waste paper, in adopting this brutish course of action, Pyongyang had also violated its commitments and ignored the solemn requests of international society."

The second consistent theme to emerge was an emphasis that North Korean actions violated international norms and that a return to the Chinese-sponsored Six-Party Talks was the only viable option for resolving this issue. This was done in a number of ways. Several articles went through a shopping list of countries and governments that had responded critically to the test, all essentially repeating the same points that North Korean actions were unjustified and a threat to regional stability. In other articles, commentary that described the test as "an action which violates international norms" (*weibei guoji chaoliu de judong*) or that contradicts the "international consensus" (*guoji gongshi*) was common. These criticisms were often followed by the argument that the Six-Party Talks were the "...only method to resolve the issue

¹⁴ See Article 16 of Administration of Internet News Information Services Provisions (*Hulianwang Xinwen Xixi Fuwu Guanli Guiding*) [Electronic (2005). Version]. Retrieved 16/04/2008 from <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/html/Dir/2005/09/27/3184.htm>.

¹⁵ Moore, G. J. (2008). How North Korea Threatens China's Interests: Understanding Chinese 'Duplicity' on the North Korean Nuclear Issue. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 8(1), 1-29. p. 11.

accepted by all countries” or that “.. all relevant parties, including China, were calling for the recommencement of the Six-Party Talks.”

A final consistent feature which appeared throughout the Chinese news samples was the concern that the nuclear test had increased regional tension and, in particular, was likely to influence Japan’s strategic posture. Some commentary noted the commitments made in the immediate aftermath of the test by both the United States and Japan to cooperate more closely in the area of missile defence and argued that the test was likely to strengthen the US-Japanese alliance. Other articles focused on how sections of the Japanese political right were seeking to use the nuclear test to argue for more military spending, a more aggressive strategic policy and the “transformation of Japan into a great military power” (*junshi daguo hua*). It was also repeatedly noted that North Korea’s nuclear test had strengthened a minority of right-wing Japanese that advocated the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan.

South Korean Coverage:

For Koreans, the subject of North Korean nuclear testing forms part of a much larger, ongoing debate about inter-Korean relations and reunification; issues which cut to the heart of Koreans’ sense of national identity. Public political discussion of Inter-Korean issues has also traditionally been very volatile as debate has often reflected long-standing social divisions within South Korean society that are rooted in ideological and regional differences which stretch as far back as Japanese occupation during the 1920’s.¹⁶ As such, analysis of coverage of the test presents an excellent case study by which to evaluate the communicative practices of different South Korean online news media and their contribution to public political discourse.

Chosun.com, the first news service analysed, presented coverage that was conservative in its general orientation, often in a way that was well-supported by solid argumentation but which other times gave the impression of bias. For instance, within the *Chosun.com* sample a wide variety of voices on the nuclear test issue were presented, although sources that could broadly be seen as supporting the case of South

¹⁶ Levin, N. D., & Han, Y.-S. (2002). *Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate Over Policies Toward North Korea*. Santa Monica: Rand. p. 54.

Korean conservatives, such as US Government officials and US media, conservative Grand National Party politicians or conservative civil society groups like the Korean Ex-Serviceman's League, tended to be dealt with in greater detail. On the other hand, when more progressive opinions were featured, such as those of former President and proponent of the 'Sunshine Policy', Kim Dae-jung or then President Roh Moo-hyun, their remarks were more likely to be contrasted with competing viewpoints.

Another noteworthy aspect of *Chosun.com*'s coverage was its criticism of President Roh's policy of tolerance (*poyong chongchaek*) toward the North. It was noted in several articles that President Roh and his government had warned that a nuclear test would result in a change to the basic approach to Inter-Korean relations but that after the test, the government was ignoring a majority of public opinion which was in favour of policy revision and stressing the need for a continuation of the Sunshine Policy of reconciliation and engagement; what one writer dubbed as "Sun faith" (*haetpyot singng*).¹⁷ In particular, the unconditional provision of aid to the North and a failure to review joint ventures such as the Kaesŏng Industrial Complex and the Mt Kŭmkang tourist attraction were attacked. This criticism of a lack of reciprocity in South Korean policy towards the North represents a consistent feature of conservative commentary in South Korean political discourse which, in this case, was persuasively argued.¹⁸

Other criticisms of the government to emerge within the sample were less convincing and often lacked solid argumentation. One journalist summed up the South Korean Government's response in this way:

In short, this Government has no concern or even understanding of what nuclear weapons are. It does not have the ability to grasp the actual state of affairs, nor the ability to deal with nuclear weapons. As a Government, it is blind to the nuclear issue. Forty-eight million citizens depend on this

¹⁷ (*Sasŏl*) *T'ongil Yŏngguwon*, "*dae Puk chechaega pulan yoiniran haesŏk kŏpu*" [Electronic (2006). Version]. *Chosun.com*. Retrieved 21/07/2008 from <http://www.chosun.com/editorials/news/200610/200610270480.html>.

¹⁸ Levin and Han, *Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate Over Policies Toward North Korea*. p. 37.

Government and now it is confronting a North Korea armed with nuclear weapons.¹⁹

While undoubtedly a serious setback for regional security, many articles in the *Chosun.com* sample overstated the threat this presented. Describing South Korea as standing “defenceless before a nuclear-armed North Korea” (*haek mujang han Pukhan ap e mubangbi ro sogae twaetta*), for instance, ignored the protection afforded by the United States’ nuclear umbrella as well as decades of Cold War experience with the doctrine of deterrence.²⁰ Anxiety was also heightened through the considerable space that was devoted to discussing the possibility of a second nuclear test, with prominence being given to both observers of North Korea and conservative South Korean politicians who predicted that a second test was a certainty and which, in the end, did not eventuate.

In contrast to the *Chosun.com* articles analysed, identifying common elements within *Naver’s* coverage was more challenging. Being a commercially run portal site that sources all its news reports externally, articles from 14 different news sources were found in the *Naver* sample that included major news agencies, such as Yonhap, Korean television broadcasters, such as MBN, established daily newspapers, such as the Seoul Sinmun and online news providers, such as Naeil.com. The diversity of *Naver* news sources, however, was not matched by a rich and detailed coverage. A majority of the articles contained in the *Naver* sample were reports of only a few paragraphs in length that offered a simple description of a particular aspect of the North Korean nuclear issue with no analysis or editorial opinion.

Brevity, on the other hand, was generally not a feature of *OhmyNews’s* coverage with the length of many articles, particularly those written by citizen journalist ‘news guerrillas’, often extending into several pages. Within the *OhmyNews* sample, roughly two-thirds of the articles were contributed by ‘news guerrillas’, with the remainder being sourced from outside news services, particularly the Yonhap News Agency, or written by *OhmyNews’s* professional journalists. In qualitative terms, the

¹⁹ (*Sasöl*) *Puk haeksilhöm ihu pakkwin sesang mot ilgnün 'haekmang' Hanguk* [Electronic (2006). Version]. *Chosun.com*. Retrieved 24/06/2008 from

http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2006/10/16/2006101660638.html.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

greatest variation in the nature and content of *OhmyNews*' coverage occurred within the articles written by 'news guerrillas', the features of which reflected both the strengths and drawbacks of this particular model of citizen-journalism.

At its best, the coverage provided by *OhmyNews*' 'news guerrillas' was able to draw together a wide variety of source material and provide a critical analysis of the issue. Some articles were noteworthy for not only utilising a wide variety of news media information from Korea, the United States, Japan and elsewhere, but also soliciting academic opinion and commentary for incorporation into their analysis and thereby adding to, rather than simply reinterpreting, already existing public political discussion of this issue. Additionally, several articles featured progressive political parties like the Democratic Labour Party and civil society groups such as the Unification Alliance, the National People's Alliance and Social Progressive Alliance; bodies whose voices, critics argue, have been sorely missing from the coverage provided by the conservative-dominated mainstream news media.²¹ Other news guerrilla-written editorials displayed a piercing critical insight that moved beyond partisan analysis and effectively critiqued both the Roh Administration's Policy of Tolerance towards the North as well as point out the limitations of the more hardline approach being advocated by conservatives.

Despite this, there were some obvious flaws present within *OhmyNews*' coverage. In many cases, 'news guerrilla' articles resembled shrill political polemics rather than news reports. This was partly due to the language employed. The racial-nationalistic flavour of many of these articles was highlighted through use of emotive language such as "the extermination of the Korean race" (*Hanminjok ui chŏlmyŏl*) and "the survival of our race" (*Uri minjok ui saengjon*). Furthermore, the goals of the United States in the region were sometimes referred to as being part of "America's hegemonic strategy" (*Miguk ui paekwon chollyak*). Interestingly, the description of the US as a hegemon (*baquan*) occasionally features in Chinese media coverage but was not found in any of the articles contained within the Chinese sample, Chinese commentary being much more circumspect about the extent of US responsibility.

²¹ See, for example, Kang. *The Struggle for Press Freedom and Emergence of "Unelected" Media Power in South Korea*. p. 84 and Choi. *Democracy After Democratization - The Korean Experience*. p. 15.

There were also problems with the reasoning contained within many of the *Ohmynews* articles. The representation of progressive opinions on the issue of the nuclear test, including from those groups mentioned above, was often conflated with a broader anti-US agenda that included hostility toward US military bases and opposition to the then US-South Korea Free Trade Agreement negotiations. The narrow racial-nationalistic discourse that featured in several of the *OhmyNews* articles was also problematic in as far as it solely blamed the US and didn't consider North Korean responsibility for what was, after all, a North Korean nuclear test. The claim that George Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech and generally belligerent rhetoric towards North Korea caused North Korea to conduct a nuclear test ignored both North Korean efforts to obtain nuclear weapons which predate the Bush Administration, as well as US participation in the many years of negotiations which preceded the North Korean decision to conduct the test, efforts which were summarily discounted as being insincere.

A similarly uneven treatment of Japan also featured in much of the *OhmyNews* coverage. As with the Chinese news services, significant space was devoted to discussing the Japanese political-right's utilisation of the nuclear test to promote its policy goals such as the revision of Japan's Peace Constitution and the "transformation of Japan into a great military power" (*kunsa taegukhwa*). Unlike the more measured Chinese coverage, however, some 'news guerrillas' went as far as to claim that broader Japanese strategy was designed to bring about a new Cold War. The security concerns of Japan, facing a nuclear-armed neighbour who only months before had provocatively test-fired several missiles into the Sea of Japan, was not raised in this context.

Online News and the Evolution of Public Political Discussion

The results of this analysis highlight the importance of national context in determining the nature of Internet-mediated political communication as, to a large extent, the nature of coverage by the five online news services analysed here reflected the political dynamics, institutional frameworks and political cultures of their host nations. In both countries, factors related to national context also point toward the contribution

likely to be made by online news services in the future evolution of public political discussion.

This study showed that political communication contained within the coverage of Chinese online news services continues to strictly conform to the political guidelines and interests of the Party-State. The clear and repeated communication of Chinese Government condemnation of the North Korean nuclear test reflected Chinese news media's 'mouthpiece' role, while the frequent featuring of aspects of the test such as the desirability of returning to the Chinese-sponsored Six-Party Talks or the dangers of Japanese militarisation clearly mirrored Chinese foreign policy goals. Even with coverage of political issues that do not directly challenge the legitimacy of the Communist Party, such as the nuclear test analysed here, the daily practice of this form of political communication appears inseparable from Party-State regulatory control and ideological guidance.

Unlike in Korea, where political activists and concerned citizens are able to band together to form collaborative organisations of citizen journalism, tight regulation of the Chinese online news sector has meant that citizen journalists seeking to participate in the creation or critique of the news are restricted to individual contributions in more isolated spaces of public political discussion, such as online chat forums or blogs. While such contributions do occasionally seep into and influence the nature of more popular mainstream news coverage, their voices are usually excluded from the production of news at this institutional level. These characteristics point toward an Internet-mediated public sphere of political discussion where diversity remains constrained and where difference can sometimes be expressed at the margins, but central institutions of public political communication continue to be dominated by entrenched political forces.

In contrast to the uniformity of China's online news service, coverage provided by Korean sites differed substantially, reflecting a greater diversity of views and opinion that exist within the country's freer democratic framework.

As noted, coverage provided by *Chosun.com* reflected a conservative political orientation which, in some cases, was well-grounded in fair standards of reasoning

and analysis, while in others, was not. Yet regardless of whether this type of conservative opinion was underpinned by solid argumentation, it is already clear that this sort of conservative opinion will not dominate online public political discourse in a way comparable to Korea's traditional media market. Unlike in the television and newspaper sectors, conservative online news sites, such as *Chosun.com*, have had to compete with a multitude of newly-formed online news services, including the two analysed here, *Naver* and *OhmyNews*. The inability of conservative media organisations to automatically translate their traditional media market dominance online has created the possibility of a more diverse Korean news media that represents a wider variety of voices and interests; an important development in the nature of public political communication in Korea.

Importantly, however, diversity in the Korean online news sector has not automatically led to fairer, more insightful coverage containing more rigorous argumentation and analysis. *Naver*, for example, while featuring political news from a wide variety of sources, as with other commercial portals, offers a service whose primary purpose is the maximisation of revenue-generating page views.²² As such, the political news analysed in this study forms only a minor part of *Naver's* total range of information services and seems geared toward attracting, however briefly, the attention of Internet users before they proceed to other sections of the *Naver* website. Some of these other sections, such as *Naver's* chat and blog-hosting services, may help promote richer, more diverse public political communication but, because of the limitations noted here, its news service seems unlikely to contribute to this process in any substantial way.

As with *Naver*, analysis of *OhmyNews's* coverage has also shown that important gains in news diversity have been offset by other problems with news coverage; in *OhmyNews's* case, the prevalence of extreme or polemical commentary unsupported by sound reasoning. This reveals one of the dilemmas facing citizen journalist-based online news services such as *OhmyNews*: how to maximise news diversity by broadening participation in the news production process while also maintaining the

²² Song, K.-j., Chang, W.-y., & Im, J.-b. (2006). Research Into Korean Portals and Types of Internet News Services: A Focus on Political and Social News (*Hanguk ui Potŏl mit Intonet Nyusu Sŏbisu Yuhyŏng e Kwanhan Yŏngu: Chŏngch'i Sahoe Nyusu rul Chungsim uro*) [Electronic Version]. *Sinmun Palchŏn Uiwonhwaee Josa Yŏngu Bogosŏ*, 1-97. Retrieved 14/05/08 from www.kcfp.or.kr. p. 48.

quality of news produced. As the results of this analysis suggest, oversight by *OhmyNews*' team of professional editors doesn't seem sufficient to always maintain this balance. Axel Bruns, in discussing citizen journalism projects, has argued that the quality of online news coverage provided by organisations like *OhmyNews* is maintained through a "publish, then filter" principle that views news not as a finished product, but as a continuing process of community discussion, critique and revision that continues after publication.²³ While *OhmyNews*' website facilitates the post-publication critique and evaluation to which Bruns refers, it is problematic to assume that all Internet users engage with online news services in such an involved manner. As the nature of *Naver*'s news coverage suggests, many casual Internet users seem to be accessing online news simply to read the news and, for these users, participation in a continuing process of community critique and evaluation is an unrealistic expectation and an inadequate way to ensure that the online political news to which they are exposed does not suffer the problems identified in this analysis. To venerate broad participation in news production while neglecting the quality of news output risks creating a public sphere dominated by diverse yet devalued political communication; what Nicholas Carr has dubbed the "hegemony of the amateur".²⁴

A feature of *OhmyNews*' coverage, and indeed a well-established characteristic of South Korean political culture, is the tendency to demonise difference and polarise opinion. The task for those seeking to maximise the democratic potential of this type of online political communication is therefore to find ways of continuing to broaden the range of political opinion represented in the news while ensuring that such opinion is well argued and aims to honestly engage with difference, rather than simply enflame it with extreme commentary. The development of this type of public political discourse, and thus a more substantive Korean democracy, is a project which, one expects, will take considerable time to realise.

²³ Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Producership*. New York: Peter Lang. p. 75.

²⁴ Carr, N. (2005). The Amoralism of Web 2.0 [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 20/08/2008 from http://www.rough.type.com/archives/2005/10/the_amorality_o.php.

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