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Testing news trustworthiness in an online public sphere: a case study of The Economist's news report covering the riots in Xinjiang, China

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Testing news trustworthiness in an online public sphere: a case study of *The Economist*'s news report covering the riots in Xinjiang, China

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Abstract: This paper explores the news trustworthiness and media credibility of *The Economist*'s news report on 9 July 2009, and the communicative roles of 846 readers' responses. Theoretically guided by news translation and cultural resistance and the online public sphere, we applied online field observation and discourse analysis and achieved two main findings: First, although the news report covered the Xinjiang riots with comprehensive and attractive details, it violated the core journalism value of media credibility and journalistic objectivity by providing misleading pictures and significant unreliable and biased coverage. Second, the major communicative roles of the online readers' responses generally match Dahlberg's six conditions of an ideal online public sphere, which is still challenging but promising to realize.

On 5 July 2009, deadly riots suddenly occurred in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China's western frontier. After reporting consecutively on the riots in Xinjiang for two days with titles such as "Unrest in China: Unrest on the Western Front" (2009) on 6 July and "Riots in China: Rumbling On" (2009) on 7 July, the British online weekly newspaper *The Economist* published "The Riots in Xinjiang: Is China Fraying?" (2009) on 9 July 2009, a six-page news report of about 3,000 words. Below the article on 9 July, the newspaper opened a "Readers' Comments" forum to attract responses from readers regarding the article and the riots in Xinjiang. During the 15 days the forum was open from 9 to 24 July, 2009, the forum attracted 1098 responses from readers all over the world. Impressed by the quantity, quality, and variety of the responses and the voluntary, interactive, and meaningful interactions in the forum, we looked into *The Economist*'s 9 July 2009 news report under the theoretical guidance of news translation and cultural resistance and the communicative roles of online responses against Dahlberg's (2001) six conditions for an ideal online public sphere. Although media credibility and the roles of online readers have attracted increasing attention, especially Western media coverage concerning non-Western regions (Antaki, Ardévol, Nuñez, & Vayreda, 2006; Jo, 2005; Kiousis, 2001; Lent, 2006; Leung & Huang, 2007; Steensen, 2009), few studies have critiqued a provocative news report by online mainstream Western media by comparing and contrasting the report itself with its readers' responses. The present case study aims to fill this void by searching for answers to the following research questions:

> RQ1: How trustworthy is *The Economist*'s 9 July 2009, news report in its coverage of the Xinjiang riots?

> RQ2: What roles do the online readers play with their forum posts as a result of the online news report?

Literature review

In this section, we begin with the literature review to set the academic background for this study. The purposes of this study call for four major categories of existing literature:

The backdrop of and rationale for studying The Economist

According to MediaUK (2011), Britain boasts 783 radio stations, 512 TV channels, 1970 magazines, and 1596 newspapers owned by 287 media outlets. Newspapers in Britain are generally divided into three groups: mass-market tabloids, such as *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror*; midmarket tabloids, such as *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*; and quality newspapers, such as *The Times, The Guardian*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. As Cridland (2010) noted, although the first two groups are collectively regarded as the popular press, generally focusing on covering celebrity and human-interest stories, the third group is usually considered more serious, mainly covering political reporting and international news.

The Economist belongs to the third group of quality newspapers. It is categorized as a magazine and published weekly in a magazine format, but it is a newspaper because it covers news and provides opinions against a newspaper deadline. We selected *The Economist* as the primary source in this study for three reasons. First, since its founding in 1843, *The Economist* has been one of the leading sources of analysis of international business and world affairs in the Western world. *The Economist*'s traditional and online versions "offer authoritative insight and opinion on international news, politics, business, finance, science and technology" ("About *The Economist* Online", 2011, para. 1). Thus, *The Economist* can be regarded as representative of mainstream Western media covering international news. Second, *The Economist* operates according to the conventional principles of editorial independence and journalistic objectivity. The published articles bear no bylines because they are "written anonymously . . . for collective voice and personality" ("*The Economist*'s Philosophy", 2011, paras. 2–3). Finally, *The Economist*'s news report on the Xinjiang riots attracted 1,098 forum responses from readers all over the world, so the newspaper provides a worthwhile phenomenon for cross-cultural media study.

News trustworthiness in relation to media bias and media credibility

According to Liu and Bates (2009), media credibility and journalistic objectivity are "the critical components in developing public trust in audiences" (p. 307). In this section, we discuss the relevant literature on these two critical components and their impact on news trustworthiness. Levi and Stoker (2000) remarked, being relational, trustworthiness assures potential trusters that the trusted party or trustees will not betray a trust. To be trustworthy, the trustees not only make a commitment but also prove able to act in the interests of the trusters by observing moral values or professional standards. In the case of news reports, trustworthiness means journalists "will not betray the trust as a consequence of either faith or bad ineptitude" (Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 476). Such trustworthiness calls for, instead of media bias, media credibility.

Media bias, in the words of McQuail (1992), means "a consistent tendency to depart from the straight path of objective truth by deviating to the left or right", and in news, bias refers to "a systematic tendency to favor (in outcome) one side or position over another" (p. 191). Xiang and Sarvary (2007) also defined media bias as "the different impressions created from an objective event by slanting information" (p. 611). As a summary, Gunter (1997) remarked,

> the key point where impartiality is concerned is that the news should not tend systematically to favor one side of an argument or dispute over another. Where this does happen, then the news can be legitimately described as "biased" (p. 19)

With a clear understanding of media bias, we will go on discussing the major categories of bias.

According to Entman (2007), media bias falls into three categories: distortion bias, content bias, and decision-making bias. The first category of bias refers to news that "purportedly distorts or falsifies reality", the second "favors one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a political conflict", and the third results from "motivations and mindsets of journalists and editors who allegedly produce the biased content" (p. 163). From the perspective of the causes of media bias, some scholars (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006; Page & Shapiro, 1992) have noted that media bias emerges from competition among media. For example, Page and Shapiro (1992) listed the procapitalist bias, minimal government bias, and nationalistic bias based on their study of the nature of the US media as businesses operating in a competitive economic marketplace.

Other scholars (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005) posited that media bias is mainly driven by consumers' socioeconomic or political demands. In the words of D'Alessio and Allen (2000), media can bias news by releasing selected news reports according to the most convenient ideological approach. Through examining possible ideological media bias in presidential elections, the authors found three types of media biases. The first is gate-keeping, which is the preference for selecting stories for one party or the other. The second is coverage bias, which considers the relative amounts of coverage each party receives. The third is statement bias, which focuses on the favorability of coverage toward one party or the other (p. 133). The three types of media biases overlap the three categories of media biases mentioned, thus facilitating our comprehension of media bias.

With regard to media credibility, Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953) identified that credibility comprises expertise and trustworthiness. While the former means the degree to which reporters are believed to be able to write correct news reports, the latter refers to the degree to which media audiences perceive the news stories as valid. According to Kiousis (2001), credibility has been researched in terms of source credibility and medium credibility, with the former focusing on "characteristics of message senders or individual speakers", and the latter focusing on "the channel through which content is delivered" (p. 382). For this study, we carefully consider both types of credibility as well as media bias.

Nevertheless, the ideals of media credibility may be difficult to fulfill given the constraints and various filters at work whenever organized professional journalism content is created (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In our case, the filters here refer to the media gatekeepers, who make decisions about whether certain news will be released. Furthermore, as scholars (Kohring & Matthes, 2005; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Singer, 2007) have noted, in today's virtual space of open and ubiquitous publication, journalism's ideals and norms have encountered new challenges. Oversight of professional standards has become a team sport, and journalists no longer control who gets to play. Such negligence makes journalism unable to fulfill its social function as a guiding instance, and readers may lose a certain amount of trust in mass media on a daily basis. Thus, news trustworthiness and media credibility have become all the more crucial between journalists as trustees and readers as trusters.

Western media coverage of developing countries such as China

By Western media, we refer to the mainstream media in the industrialized, developed countries in Western Europe and North America. Shan and Wang (2009) found\ freedom of the press, truth-telling, social justice, and media benefit are fundamental ethical ideas of modern Western journalism. Because of these media functions and fundamental ideas, "a free press in the Western tradition entails the risk of negative news coverage" (Peterson, 1980, p. 68). As Peterson (1980) remarked, spokespeople from the

developing world regard the Western media's concentration on wars, conflict, and disasters as psychologically damaging to the development and image of their countries.

Other scholars (Chang, 1988; Graber, 1989; Huang & McAdams, 2000) also confirmed that the Western media's news coverage of developing countries has been charged with being biased, negative, crisis-oriented, and looking down upon developing countries while displaying strong Western supremacism. For example, when riots occurred on 14 April 2008, in Lhasa, Tibet, mainstream Western media rushed to criticize the Chinese government for cracking down on protesters. According toWang (2008), some Western media wrote fraudulent reports about Chinese police officers beating Tibetans. Even after the armed forces were revealed in the media as Nepali and Indian policemen putting down violent Tibetan protesters in Nepal and India, most Western media continued their coverage of the riots as usual. One explanation is that "Western reporters tend to dramatize problems and overplay controversy to attract readers' and viewers' attention with headline-making news" (Yu, 2003, p. 92).

Roles of the readers, especially those in cyberspace

As for the critical academic views of the growing roles of readers, especially in online forums, in today's cyberspace of open and ubiquitous publication, some scholars (Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Singer, 2007) have observed an infinite number of participants simultaneously serve as sources, audiences, and information providers. In addition to sharing information and exchanging ideas, readers set out to influence and compete for attention with cable networks and popular user-generated content. Via various online media, readers today are actually challenging journalists' exclusive right to deem a particular piece of information credible.

Other scholars (Grunig, 2009; Steensen, 2009; Wood & Smith, 2005) have noted, compared with traditional media, online media have adopted an "open media code" and "buffet style" to organize their news content. This means online media are open to all possible readers, and readers, as if they were in a buffet restaurant, can taste whichever part of a piece of news or type of media they are interested in. Via web links, readers not only choose media content but also, through uploading posts, instantly make comments publicly on what they have read and simultaneously check their opinions with those of other readers for continuous and dynamic online discussions. Thus, Grunig (2009) commented, digital media, which are "dialogical, interactive, relational, and global", seem to turn online communication "toward a two-way symmetrical model" (pp. 6–7). Meanwhile, he also cautioned that a common problem with online communication has been the unethical use of fake blogs or posts. Steensen (2009) seconded the caution by saying, "assuming different identities has become a normal practice in online discourse", and for different purposes, some online discussion participants "express themselves through transformed identities" (p. 20). We took these factors in the existent literature into careful consideration in the present study.

Having completed a review of the relevant literature, we now discuss the theoretical frameworks for this study.

Theoretical frameworks

For this study, we applied Conway's (2010) news translation and cultural resistance theory and Dahlberg's (2001) online public sphere principles as the theoretical frameworks. Based on previous studies, especially Pym's study of localization in his translation theory, Conway (2010) summarized and applied the theory of news translation and cultural resistance in his study of news stories in Canadian broadcasts. Briefly, news translation occurs when international news agencies localize foreign news in the local press for local readers. The localization process involves translating between languages and substituting local cultural references for foreign ones. In the words of Pym (2004), "the foreign news we read in the local press can legitimately be seen as a localization of foreign-language texts and transformed in ways that go beyond endemic notions of translation" (p. 4). This means that foreign news reports are usually translated and shaped according to the anticipated end-users' culturally specific needs and responses.

According to Conway (2010), news translation involves three types of people. The first are the locals with whom journalists make contact and from whom they get news. The second are the journalists who compile accounts from eyewitnesses among the locals and translate the accounts into stories for the targeted consumers. Finally, gatekeepers such as the chief editors and news media sponsors make certain the stories to be published fit the expected readers' tastes and observe the newspaper's conventions.

As a result, news translation is characterized by two forms of cultural resistance. The first form of resistance comes from the culture of reception. Briefly, this means that journalists "transform their stories" or "make their descriptions of events taking place in foreign cultural context to conform to the anticipated readers' expectations" (Conway, 2010, p. 189). Furthermore, with the increase in the cultural gap, journalists have to make a greater effort to make their reports conform to end-users' expectations. In contrast, the second form of resistance emanates from the culture being described. This is a resistance to the use of language used to describe the whole meaning-making mechanism of culture. When journalists try to describe an event in a foreign culture through the process of news translation, they are limited by "circumscribing the event from symbol to symbol to symbol" (p. 191). They may capture certain aspects of an event in a foreign land, but their reports are "necessarily reductive" (p. 189) because capturing culture "exhaustively will always be out of reach" (p. 191).

Having described the news translation and cultural resistance theory, we now talk about online public sphere principles. With regard to the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas proposed the concept in his book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, published in German in 1962. The book was translated into English as *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and published in 1989 (Stanford Encyclopedia, 2007). Habermas (1989[1962]) saw the public sphere as a domain of social life in which a body of private individuals actively assembles to freely and openly discuss and debate matters of common concern. Just as Villa (1992) remarked, the public sphere, as an institutional arena of discursive interaction, is central to democratic theory and practice. Grbeša (2003) also noted the media in traditional form and online versions facilitate public discussions by providing a technological and structural forum and by initiating public discussions and, perhaps, setting the agenda.

Although irresponsible behaviors and even false posts are criticized as a result of the anonymous nature of online forum discussions, scholars (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Antaki et al., 2006; Dahlberg, 2001; Fung & Kedl; 2000; Papacharissi, 2002) still regard online forum discussions as a new public sphere. In this virtual

space, diverse participants as netizens enjoy the privilege of freedom of speech and political participation they are deprived of elsewhere and converge, interact, and converse to construct a deliberative democracy by transcending geographical, technological, social, and psychological boundaries. Based on a comprehensive review of the research results concerning online forum discussions, Dahlberg (2001) developed six conditions for an ideal online public sphere.

The first condition is autonomy from the State and economic power. Under the overwhelming threat of the State and the corporate colonization of cyberspace, a plethora of noncommercial online forums still exist through e-mail lists, Usenet groups, chat rooms, and Web publishing. Without affiliation in any political parties, interest groups, or corporate concerns, these online forums actually "facilitate the growth and coordination of a global culture of resistance to the corporate takeover of cyberspace and of public life in general" (Dahlberg, 2001, para. 8). Thematization and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims form the second condition. Thematization refers to the pattern of discussion in most online forums that "clearly parallels the rational, dialogic form of conversation required within the public sphere" (para. 10). Meanwhile, participants from various backgrounds follow this pattern to exchange and critique "claims on every conceivable question on a myriad of online forums", the type of dialogue that Habermas speaks of, which demands justification for each speech act and inquires into the validity and sincerity of claims (Kolb, 1996). As the third condition, reflexivity means "the process of standing back from, critically reflecting upon, and changing one's position when faced by 'the better argument'" (Dahlberg, 2001, para. 15). Aware of the self-transformative and democratic possibilities of cyberinteraction, some forum participants could transform from privately oriented individuals into publicly-oriented netizens.

As for the fourth condition of ideal role-taking, "few Internet forums presently involve any great proportion of ongoing, respectful, and meaningful exchange of ideas" (Dahlberg, 2001, para. 33). Nevertheless, participants tend to "[attempt] to put themselves in the position of the other so as to come to an understanding of the other's perspective" (para. 24) regardless of their social and cultural differences. Sincerity is the fifth condition for an ideal public sphere. To ensure genuine understanding and rational assessment of identities and positions, discursive participants are expected to "make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information and their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires" (para. 34). Aware of the problem of online postings that aim to misinform, embarrass, self-promote, provoke, gossip, and trivialize, participants have to "provide convincing support for their assertions before their positions become accepted by other participants" (para. 41). The final condition is discursive equality and inclusion. Since "social hierarchies and power relations are leveled out by the 'blindness' of cyberspace to bodily identity, it allows people to interact as if they were equals" (para. 43). However, despite the so-called bracketing of identity, the development of netiquette, and moderation, discursive inequalities and exclusions still exist in the present online discourse, which "tend to be biased in favor of those individuals and groups that dominate the offline discourse" (Dahlberg, 2001, para. 52). Before analyzing our collected data under these two theoretical frameworks, we introduce the research methods for our study.

Research methods

To collect data, we used field observation of online interactions. As mentioned earlier, *The Economist* news report attracted 1098 forum posts all in English. Due to the repetition, meaningless and irrelevant

messages, or provisions of mere links to other sources, we excluded 252 posts from our analysis, for a total of 846. To analyze the news report and the selected posts, we used discourse analysis to sift the emerging themes. Van Dijk (1999) defined discourse as "text and talk in context" (p. 291). According to Potter (1987), discourse analysis is a type of content analysis concerned with studying language use, texts, conversational interaction, or communicative events, used to "construct and create social interaction and diverse social worlds" (p. 158). Fairclough (1995) also noted that discourse analysis is not only a research method but also a perspective and a self-sufficient paradigm for approaching and studying the social world. To him, discourses are coherent bodies of representations that do not faithfully reflect reality like mirrors but are artifacts of language through which "a given social practice is represented from a particular point of view" (p. 56).

Applicable to all types of social texts including recorded online media reports and forum discussions, the method analyzes the selected texts by searching for patterned differences and similarities in the content and form of the dialogues and examining the function and results of the dialogues. To reduce subjectivity during our analysis, the two authors independently coded *The Economist*'s online news report and the transcripts of the 846 forum posts and analyzed them comparatively at the message level from the perspective of the writer of the messages rather than from the angle of a mere intercoder. By categorizing whether the posts were supportive, negative, or neutral to *The Economist*'s news report in terms of content and stances, we used Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960) to calculate the intercoder reliability for each category. We used an online kappa calculator from the website graphpad.com/quickcalcs/Kappa2 to calculate the kappa. Intercoder reliabilities were calculated based on 200 randomly selected posts (approximately 20%), and the intercoder agreement (Cohen's kappa) was .922, .895, and .852 for the three categories of posts (affirmative, negative, and neutral, respectively).

Second, against the theoretical guidance of news translation and cultural resistance, we examined how exactly the news report maintained objectivity and credibility in terms of positively providing "independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information" or negatively offering "partial, unfair, and outright lies" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 42). Finally, we examined the communicative roles of the forum posts against Dahlberg's (2001) six conditions of an ideal online public sphere. Since the chosen online news report and all the posts in the forum are intended for public consumption, our selection and analysis were consistent with the ethics of online human subjects research (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

Findings and analysis

We discuss our research findings, which concern the news trustworthiness and media credibility of *The Economist*'s news report and the communicative roles of the forum posts.

Localization of foreign news

As discussed earlier, the first major aspect of Conway's (2010) theory of news translation and cultural resistance is the localization of foreign news through translation between languages and the substitution of local cultural references for foreign ones. *The Economist*'s news report fits in with this aspect of the theory very well. On the one hand, translation between the local languages Mandarin, Uighur, or other

local dialects and English was involved. According to Shan and Chen (2011), among the 21 million residents in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, there are 47 ethnic groups, with Uighurs making up 46%, Han Chinese 39%, Kazaks 7%, and others 8%. However, in Urumqi, the capital city of the autonomous region and the site of the riot on 5 July 2009, Han Chinese account for 73% while Uighurs make up 12.3% of the total population. On the other hand, localization of cultural references for the English-speaking world included at least the Chinese and Uighur cultures. Other cultural references could also be involved depending on the efforts of *The Economist*'s journalist in compiling the news report during the entire translation process.

People involved in the news translation process

According to Conway (2010), the news translation process involves the locals providing the news, the journalist covering the news, and the news media gatekeepers. How did the three types of people perform in this particular news coverage of the Xinjiang riot? To be relatively objective, we searched for answers to this question mainly by analyzing the forum posts. Of the 846 posts, 165 supported the news report (19.50%), 325 posts were neutral (38.42%), and 356 posts criticized the report (42.08%) according to the content and stances. Among the first category, we read posts expressing straightforward support such as, "Great article – probably the most nuanced description of what has been going on in Xinjiang over the past six days" (Li, 10 July 2009, 10:01). We also encountered supportive posts that reveal the posters' wishes for more information such as the following:

> Good article! Nobody hears about the atrocities unleashed against the minorities in China. Tibet has always been in the limelight, but people don't know the other ethnic groups, their rights, and religious beliefs in China. Please highlight those other groups as well, who suffer under the Communist rule. (Justice, 14 July 2009, 4:13)

More importantly, supportive posts argued for the critical tradition of the Western media (Amused Observer, 10 July 2009, 12:09; Feelsonatural81, 10 July 2009, 4:32; Gargantual1, 14 July 2009, 12:56; Taiwanlong, 9 July, 2009, 11:34; Vischwen, 10 July 2009, 12:07). For example, in response to Happyfish (18 July 2009, 2:08) concerning the Western media's berating of China, Goodman (18 July 2009) wrote the following:

> Western media berates all countries, not just China. They berate even their own government. That's what freedom of [the] press means. I find articles in your *Economist* very good and impartial. If you don't like what *The Economist* says, you can always listen to your government. (4:24)

Clearly, posts in this category agree with and support *The Economist*'s news story with complimentary terms such as "good", "great", and "impartial".

Among the second category of posts, which were neutral, some posts simply clarified or added information to the news story, such as the following: "The Tiananmen affair was China's domestic problem. Tibet is a nation invaded by China in 1950. It is off the mark to compare the two with the riots in Xinjiang" (Nagarjuna, 9 July, 2009, 8:38). Other posts expressed straightforward opinions such as the following: "The killing of innocent people, regardless by Hans or by Uighurs, is a crime! And the murderers represent themselves only, NOT [sic] those sharing the same ethnicity" (Fraser, 10 July 2009,

3:11). Most importantly, in still other posts, posters exchanged critical and constructive ideas. For example:

> *The Economist* is not like other newspapers. It doesn't disguise the fact that its news section contains mixed facts and opinions. I have been reading the newspaper for 20 years, and it has always been like this. If you want accurate reporting without a slant, you'd better off reading AP or Reuters. (Bismarck, 10 July 2009, 5:14)

> I am a Chinese that grew up in the States, but I live in China now. To my fellow Chinese writing here, you guys really NEED [sic] to cool it. Reading the article, I wouldn't say that there is anything blatantly anti-China about it at all. It remains relatively neutral. Chinese are too sensitive and purposely go through every sentence written/uttered by Western media for signs that Westerners are against China. (Chelau, 10 July 2009, 11:20)

Thus, these posts neither staunchly supported nor strongly opposed *The Economist* and its news report. Nevertheless, they enriched the online discussions with additional information or personal critique from a neutral perspective.

The third category consists of posts that explicitly opposed *The Economist*'s gatekeepers and reporting of the Xinjiang riot. There is strong skepticism in quite a number of posts (Bismarck 111, 10 July 2009, 5:56; Funiushan, 9 July, 2009, 23:36; Gold Phoenix, 10 July 2009, 2:18; Neptune Gao, 10 July 2009, 6:39; Toytony, 10 July 2009, 7:14) about the reliability of the news story's sources. For example:

> "Overseas Uighur activists say, because the police opened fire." Is that independently confirmed truth? Did the police fire at people or did the police fire warning shots? There is no integrity in journalism these days, just partial truth. One simple thing, why did the Western media choose to ignore the fact that most of the 156 deaths are Han Chinese? (Toytony, 10 July 2009, 7:14)

Why did the journalist regard the overseas Uighur activists as a reliable source of information instead of eyewitnesses at the scene? One post provided an answer to this question: "Instead of sympathizing with the Han Chinese who had 123 lives lost among the total number of 156 in the riots, *The Economist* sees this incident as an opportunity to bash China" (Shah, 13 July 2009, 9:16). Other posts (Bismarck111, 10 July 2009, 6:03; Hidden Dragon, 10 July 2009, 7:12; EReader, 15 July 2009, 8: 41; Man On Earth, 10 July 2009, 7:16; Scatologist, 10 July 2009, 4:57) criticized the journalist, with one correcting the journalist by saying, "Xinjiang is officially one of the five autonomous regions in China. It is not a province" (Scatologist, 10 July 2009 4:57). Another poster (Economistbuster, 9 July, 2009, 9:39) commented on the misleading caption above Picture No. 1: "the journalist is logically chaotic and has confused the relationship between cause and effect by paralleling 'racial killing' and 'heavy-handed policing'." The original caption reads: "Racial killings and heavyhanded policing stir up a repressed and dangerous province" ("The Riots in Xinjiang", 2009, p. 1).

Finally, other posts (Deng, 15 July 2009, 7:50; Fischer, 17 July 2009, 8:27; Gold Phoenix, 10 July 2009, 2:18; NotSoBlackAndWite, 10 July 2009, 8:12; Wei, 11 July 2009, 2:42) denounced the clear bias and double standards among the gatekeepers in Western media including *The Economist*. For example, one post observed: "*The Economist* often failed to provide a good enough report in Asia and Africa like its reports about the US or EU" (Wei, 11 July 2009, 2:42). Another post said, "No! It is bias, one-sided, and its double standards and selective reporting permeate the article. It is clearly aimed at shaping public

opinion at the expense of innocent lives, journalistic ethics, and basic human conscience" (Dekoff, 12 July 2009, 3:08). This stance is reaffirmed in the following post:

> Most Western media may be very careful in reporting domestic news when their audience is relatively familiar with the facts so you seldom see blatant lies. In international news reporting, however, they may feel their latitude for truth-bending is much wider . . . *The Economist* just proved it didn't rank high on the truth scale. (EmperorsClothesRipper, 15 July 2009, 3:18)

Two forms of cultural resistance

These posts clearly show readers did not like the double standards of *The Economist*'s gatekeepers, who released clearly biased news reporting. Coupled with the unreliable news sources and the journalist's irresponsibility, readers hesitated to accept *The Economist* as a credible media source for trustworthy news reports as can be seen in the following posts (BJren, 20 July 2009, 8:12; EmperorsClothesRipper, 15 July 2009, 3:18; Jyoshin, 10 July 2009, 9:06; Louis, 11 July 2009, 4:41; NotSoBlackAndWhite, 10 July 2009, 8:12; Universalist, 13 July 2009, 7:49). Below are two examples:

> I am disappointed that an *Economist*'s article can be filled with much speculation and biased views . . . It often requires good knowledge of the history and culture of a country to fully understand issues arising over that land. (NotSoBlackAndWhite, 10 July 2009, 8:12)

> It should be no surprise that *The Economist* has persisted its biased views when it covers China issues. It does so at least because in this world there are still many people loving this tone, and liking to see China through this type of colored glass. In the news coverage, I see few reliable facts, and Western readers are thus misled. (BJren, 20 July 2009, 8:12)

These examples expressed readers' disappointment and dissatisfaction. To them, *The Economist*'s news report was biased due to speculation and the lack of basic knowledge of local history and culture. The biased views of the Western media regarding Chinese issues were often taken for granted because this tone was conventional and popular among some targeted readers. Readers' disappointment in the culture of description and dissatisfaction with the culture of reception fit in very well with the two forms of cultural resistance described in the last aspect of Conway's (2010) theory of news translation and cultural resistance. The journalist and the gatekeepers of *The Economist* made a significant effort to "make their descriptions of events taking place in foreign cultural context to conform to the anticipated readers' expectations" (Conway, 2010, p. 189)

Having analyzed the media credibility of *The Economist*'s news story and the forum posts, we now discuss the communicative roles of the chosen posts against the six conditions of Dahlberg's (2001) ideal online public sphere.

Autonomy from the State and economic power

The first condition of Dahlberg's (2001) ideal online public sphere theory means posters in any online bulletin board such as a chat room, message board, or online forum are not affiliated with any political parties, interest groups, or corporate concerns. Together, the posters "facilitate the growth and coordination of a global culture of resistance to the corporate takeover of cyberspace and of public life in general" (Dahlberg, 2001, para. 8). Close examination of the selected posts revealed that, except for 55 posters who clarified their origins, including China (23), India (15), Turkey (five), Canada (three), the

United States (three), Germany (two), Thailand (two), Malaysia (one), and Finland (one), 791 of the 846 posters simply created nicknames such as "EmperorsClothesRipper", "Universalist", or "Gold Phoenix". Although some posters were suspicious that some Chinese posters had been brainwashed and paid by the Chinese government, the posters showed no clear evidence to prove their suspicion. In fact, one poster claimed, "I may not be able to speak on behalf of all the Chinese here, but I believe most of them are self-hired just like me" (Serene Sea, 14 July 2009, 10:36). Accordingly, we cannot say for certain there is complete autonomy from the State and economic power though we found most of the posts expressed personal opinions and the interactions between posters were genuine and meaningful.

Thematization and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims

Dahlberg's (2011) second condition requires forum participants follow "a rational, dialogic form of conversation" to exchange and critique "claims on every conceivable question" (para. 10) with justification. Abundant evidence supported this condition among all three categories of supportive, neutral, and opposed posts (EmperorsClothesRipper, 15 July 2009, 3:18; Feelsonatural81 10 July 2009, 4:32; Goodman, 18 July 2009, 4:24; Gold Phoenix, 11 July 2009, 1:39; Hartog, 12 July 2009, 5:49; Moveon, 12 July 2009, 13:06; NoGo, 10 July 2009, 8:55; Wack-Intelligence, 9 July, 2009, 11:27; Wei, 11 July 2009, 5:16). For example:

> @ Fahrettin Tahir,
>
> Can you please clarify what you meant your peoples who live in Chinese occupied territory; How many of them and the name of the occupied territory? (Small Fry, 12 July 2009, 10:30)
>
> Small Fry,
>
> Our people are the Uighurs, who speak a Turkish we in Turkey understand without much trouble. There are only about 8 million of them left because the Chinese governments in preceding centuries have killed so many and the present government prevents them from making as many children as they want. (Tahir, 12 July 2009, 10:39)
>
> @ Fahrettin,
>
> The Uighurs live in Xinjiang, which, under International Law, is Chinese territory, since all nations of the world recognize that China has the sovereignty over it. If the Uighurs have any complaints about their lives, they can also petition to the Central Government of China. Just because they have grievances does not mean they have the rights to claim the whole of Xinjiang. If the Chinese-Americans in California have grievances, can they have the rights to claim all the China-towns? (Gold Phoenix, 12 July 2009, 11:10)

This is a typical exchange of ideas in a rational and dialogic form of conversation. From Small Fry's question to Tahir, to Fahrettin's response, and to Gold Phoenix's response, we heard a complete and meaningful conversation about the Uighurs' complaints and the Chinese government's family planning policy for minorities in China. Moreover, the critical responses are justified with specific details such as the language and number of Uighurs and rational reasoning regarding an analogy between Uighurs in Xinjiang and Chinese Americans in California.

Reflexivity

Dahlberg's third condition calls for meditative and critical self-reflection and empathy in a heated online debate so as to think and talk as a "publicly-oriented netizen" instead of fighting for "the better argument" from the perspective of a "privately oriented individual" (Dahlberg, 2001, para. 15). There are also sufficient illustrations of this condition among the forum posts (Anti-Rob, 20 July 2009, 9:21; Aurona, 11 July 2009, 1:58; JasonP76, 10 July 2009, 7:40; Indica, 11 July 2009, 11:59; Moveon, 12 July 2009, 1:21; SeeingIsBelieving, 17 July 2009, 7:19). Below are two examples:

> An inquiring mind:
>
> You said, 'the Western civilization is not perfect, but in that system, there is always room for open debate and free elections,' and you asked, 'do you have that in China?'
>
> I want to say we can talk freely on the Internet just as you. Maybe we are still not as free as you, but there has been big progress. We'll do better and we believe in democracy, but it takes time. (Anti-Rob, 20 July 2009, 9:21)
>
> Aussie Louis:
>
> Thanks for your comments. I was thinking of Western political commentators, editorials in the serious media. I have stated my view that Xinjiang and Tibet should, could, have become autonomy within the framework of one China. I want to see an economically strong China. Without some fairness in her political and economic systems, it is not possible for China to achieve the status she deserves. (Indica, 11 July 2009, 11:59)

In these examples, the two posters expressed their ideas calmly and thoughtfully. Instead of heating up the debate, they offered factual information and reasonable thoughts to other posters. The first poster was responding to another poster's question concerning freedom of speech and democratic elections. The second poster was describing his peaceful blueprint concerning the future of Xinjiang and Tibet and the efforts China needs to make in terms of political and economic fairness. The dialogic interactions between the posters demonstrate that their ideas are self-reflective and their thoughts are profound. Moreover, the posters carried on these discursive interactions as publicly-oriented netizens.

Ideal role-taking

Dahlberg's fourth condition expects posters to put themselves in others' shoes and carry out an "ongoing, respectful, and meaningful exchange of ideas" (Dahlberg, 2001, para. 33). Again, quite a few posts (Bismarck, 11 July 2009, 1:53; Chelau, 10 July 2009, 11:37; Gold Phoenix, 11 July 2009, 1:39; Goodman, 18 July 2009, 4:24; Happyfish, 18 July 2009, 2:08; John2003, 10 July 2009, 11:32) on the chosen forum met this condition. For instance:

> I think this article tries to inform those not living in China about what happened in Xinjiang. This newspaper is not meddling in anyone's affairs. If all countries prohibit other media from writing about them, then how do we know what happened in other countries? And there is nothing wrong with commenting on this issue. (Braveman, 17 July 2009, 4:00)
>
> I read about the religious restrictions by the Chinese government in Xinjiang . . . Here is a list:

(1) Banning boys under 18, government officials and workers in state owned companies from entering a Mosque. In some cases women.
(2) The same group is not being allowed to pray in public.
(3) Not allowing the same people to fast during the Ramadan month and not allowing children past puberty and under 18 to fast . . . . (Bismarck 111, 10 July 2009, 22:42).

To Bismack 111:

The religion restriction on Uighur government officials and workers is based on the fact that these people are Uighur Communists. As members of the Communist Party, they are atheists. For people under 18, they lack the judgment for religious affairs, especially institutionalized regions. This is similar to why they cannot vote either. (Peng, 10 July 2009, 22:51)

In the above, the first poster commented on the media's necessary function to keep readers abreast of what is going on in any country. More importantly, the poster expressed his or her rational and emotional understanding of *The Economist* to carry news with opinions. The second and third posters offered an extended example, which illustrates clearly a complete and meaningful ongoing dialogue between Bismarck111 and Luke Peng over the Chinese government's restrictions on religious belief among Uighurs in Xinjiang. Both posters showed respect to each other in their repeated questions and answers.

Sincerity

To meet Dahlberg's fifth condition, online posters ought to sincerely present all relevant information and their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires to one another and provide convincing evidence to support their argument (Dahlberg, 2001, para. 34). On the chosen online forum, posts (AusChin, 18 July 2009, 4:40; Daveycool, 24 July 2009, 6:04; Liverpool2005, 21 July 2009, 3:46; Smiter, 15 July 2009, 11:13; Tahir, 18 July 2009, 5:49; Xiong, 15 July 2009, 11:12) frequently met the fifth condition. For example:

We happened to be travelling in Xinjiang early July . . . What we had seen gave a picture that those conflicts in Urumqi's several spots arose at the same time. We believed those were not occasional . . . This article is long enough to expose the typical adherence to subjects like this one. When talking about the dead or injured, it tries to refute 'those killed were overwhelmingly Hans.' Instead, it complained that the authorities did not provide racial breakdown and that the Uighur exiles said those killed included many Uighurs. What a signal it wants to convey? It seems that they don't care how many Hans were killed, but if there is any Uighur killed, it's a matter! Those dead are all lives vanished, no matter they were Uighurs or Hans . . . Remember the history that the British organized East Turkestan independence movement in early 20th century in Kashgar attempting to separate Xinjiang from China? Should China talk to Britain? China today is not China in 1989. Since China has been changing, though not to the extent that satisfies all democratic standards (none does in the world), we should take their achievements into account, and we in the democratic world should examine ourselves if we have changed enough to cope with the new situation. (RN, 14 July 2009, 8:26)

This lengthy post is an excellent example of sincerity with rational arguments supported by sufficient and convincing evidence. As an eyewitness tourist, the poster confirmed that the killing and burning during the Xinjiang riots "were not occasional" based on what he or she had seen on the tour bus on the night of

5 July 2009 in Urumqi. More importantly, this poster exposed the news report's biased writing style by showing concern over the lost lives of Uighurs only while neglecting those of Han Chinese. What is most praiseworthy is the poster's eye-opening statement that China today is not what it was yesterday, and countries in the developed world ought to adjust to the new situation in China.

Discursive equality and inclusion

Due to the social hierarchies and power relations, discursive inequalities and exclusions still exist in online discourse, though discursive equality and inclusion is Dahlberg's sixth condition for an ideal online public sphere (2001, para. 52). In fact, we observed posts with both features in the chosen online forum. For example:

> Hey, guys. I'm from Yining City, Xinjiang. It's our Xinjiang's [internal] affairs whether we belong to China or not. I have two points: First, why did *The Economist* delete my comments? Is it because I said we Xinjiang people are against your white bias? Don't you Western media brag about your freedom of speech? I am so disappointed at your so-called freedom of speech! (Cui, 17 July 2009, 2:14)

> Azureangel's comment is so far the best and the most rational I have ever seen. Criticizing the Chinese government shouldn't be met with furious nationalism by Chinese. It's just totally unnecessary and counter-productive. Similarly, it is worthless to be too angry about bias within the Western community regarding China's rising clout . . . (HikingAdam, 23 July 2009, 11:18)

In the first post, the poster complained *The Economist* might have deleted his or her post. Similar complaints were observed in four other places (Bismarck111 13 July 2009, 14:16; Cui, 17 July 2009, 2:14; Sanmartinian, 16 July 2009, 10:50; Serene Sea 14 July 2009, 10: 34). As one poster remarked, "I don't think it is the regular users who deleted the posts" (Bismarck111, 13 July 2009, 14:16); whoever deleted and supervised the posts, the issue is more human-made rather than technical. This shows that excluding some posters' voices may be a reality in online forum discussions. Discursive equality and inclusion were demonstrated in the second post, which called for fair treatment of different opinions and various criticisms from China and Western countries. Here, we heard outcries from the posters, who advocated that all media should play their roles to "foster world peace and harmony" instead of "sowing discord and miseries" by "distorting the truths and sensationalizing them to sell their publications" (AussieLouis, 11 July 2009, 4:41).

Conclusion

Answers to the research questions

The purposes of this study were to explore the news trustworthiness and media credibility of *The Economist*'s news report of the Xinjiang riots on 9 July 2009, and the communicative roles of the selected 846 readers' responses to this media source and its news report. To this end, we raised RQ1 (How trustworthy is *The Economist*'s 9 July 2009, news report in coverage of the Xinjiang riots?) and RQ2 (What roles do online readers play with their forum posts as a result of the online news report?). Through the theoretical lenses of Conway's (2010) news translation and cultural resistance theory and Dahlberg's

(2001) online public sphere principles and via online field observation and discourse analysis, we achieved the following findings as answers to the research questions.

Regarding RQ1, we found that, on the one hand, the news story and *The Economist* still appealed to many readers, especially those who were accustomed to the Western media's news reporting. Therefore, *The Economist* and its 9 July 2009 news report together with two earlier reports on 6 and 7 July should be recognized for their timely and flexible coverage of the riots in Xinjiang for readers all over the world. In the case of the particular news report on 9 July, the journalist compiled a variety of necessary facts and details and transformed them into a six-page, 3000- word news story, which was quite comprehensive and attractive from the beginning to the end. More importantly, *The Economist* opened an online forum, which not only spread its news far and wide but also contributed to the online public sphere by attracting more than 1000 posts offering responses from various cultural perspectives.

However, the news report and consequently *The Economist*, on the other hand, lost much of their trustworthiness and credibility due to a series of media biases. By relying on overseas Uighur activists as the source of information, the journalist reported that because the police opened fire, the Uighur protesters became angrier and killed Han Chinese with clubs and stones. Even when trying to cite the words of eyewitnesses, the journalist did not clarify whether the killers with clubs and stones were Uighurs or Han Chinese. No wonder some readers doubted the intentions or professionalism of *The Economist* in releasing this news report. Other forum readers also observed that clear bias and double standards existed among the gatekeepers of *The Economist*. Thus, we found all three types of media biases, gate-keeping bias, coverage bias, and statement bias, put forward by D'Alessio and Allen (2000).

Consequently, two types of dissatisfaction with the news story and rejection of *The Economist* by readers in and outside China arose. For instance, 356 of the 846 or more than 42% of the selected posts opposed *The Economist*'s news report due to its media biases. Many posters in the culture of description opposed *The Economist*'s news report because of its speculation and lack of basic knowledge of the local history and culture. Many other posters in the culture of reception lost hope in *The Economist* due to its clear biases and double standards in providing misleading reports about developing countries such as China and more carefully examined news about domestic affairs for British readers.

As for RQ2, our findings generally match Dahlberg's six conditions of an ideal online public sphere. First, although we cannot say for certain there is complete autonomy from the State and economic power, we found that most of the posters expressed personal opinions and interacted with one another genuinely and meaningfully. Second, the online forum was filled with repeated exchanges of interesting arguments. Some posters tracked one another for further dialogues about an idea or aspect in the news report until a meaningful end. Others formed two lines of active posts for or against a proposed topic in the forum. The majority of the posts along both lines were usually justified with specific supporting evidence. Third, with sufficient meditation and empathy, posters exchanged their ideas concerning the merits and demerits of *The Economist*'s news coverage with facts and opinions mixed together. These are typical examples of reflexivity from the perspective of publicly-oriented netizens.

Fourth, ideal-role taking is well illustrated by posts explaining the media's function in general and *The Economist*'s news report with opinions in particular. Quite a few posts showed sufficient empathy and carried out their exchange of ideas or argument on an ongoing, respectful, and meaningful manner. As for the fifth condition of sincerity, the extended example suffices it to say that this condition has been met. As

an on-site tourist, the poster exposed the biased perspective of *The Economist*'s news report with eyewitness evidence and historical facts. Finally, the examples of the sixth condition revealed the strong possibility of an ideal public sphere, where every participant contributes mutually beneficial news and information on an equal footing though discursive inequalities and exclusions still exist in online discourse and some online media take all commercial measures available for survival.

Contributions as theoretical and practical implications

The contributions of the present study lie in its theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study has enriched the existent body of literature on media bias and credibility through a specific case study of an online mainstream Western media news report of developing countries such as China. By analyzing the online news report and its forum posts representing opinions from various cultural perspectives, this study has not only added more validity to Conway's (2010) news translation and cultural resistance theory but also proved that Dahlberg's (2001) online public sphere principles are basically sound in theory.

Practically, this study demonstrates that the media credibility of online Western media such as *The Economist* is differently observed in the West and developing countries. Online readers need to be engaged in increased message scrutiny to guard against partial, unfair, and outright lies while fighting for more independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive news reports. Meanwhile, the present study also reveals that, although some mainstream media may still distort truths and sensationalize events to sell more publications for survival in the competitive commercial world, the ideal online public sphere for freedom of speech, political participation, and deliberative democracy is not far from reality. The ideal online public sphere is under construction right now with millions of online discussion participants as message decoders and encoders representing various cultural perspectives.

Limitations and call for future studies

This case study has at least three limitations. First, in this critical media study, we as researchers should have made our critical voices heard louder throughout the paper. Instead, we mainly depended on the existing literature by other scholars and online forum posts to convince readers of our arguments. Meanwhile, as researchers, we might have been somewhat subjective due to our cultural backgrounds and national emotions, thus affecting our critical ability in analyzing the news story and the online forum responses. Second, this is just a qualitative discourse analysis of one news report of a mainstream Western newspaper, *The Economist*. Therefore, readers are advised not to apply the findings here to other Western media or Western media as a whole. Finally, the quality of the findings of the present study may have been greatly strengthened if we had injected triangulation of either a quantitative content analysis or ethnographic in-depth interviews with some online forum participants or other ordinary readers. Future studies may either explore those areas we have not touched on or make a comparative study of the major differences in certain Western media in their coverage of similar events in different parts of the world.

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