

Cyber vigilantism, transmedia collective intelligence, and civic participation

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Emerging media afford netizens the opportunity to participate in critical civic discourse by collaboratively constructing and sharing previously inaccessible information across multiple platforms. This paper examined the communicative behaviors constituting the recent phenomenon of cyber vigilantism (human flesh search) in China, particularly how emerging media have been appropriated for online searches to hunt for personal information about social deviants to restore public morality. Our findings suggest that the identification of corrupt officials and circulation of their private data online amplified attention on their abuse of power and pressured the authorities toward greater accountability. Blogs, forums, and social networking sites helped support the expression of alternative public opinions. Novel mash-ups further stimulated the transmediation of political parodies that challenged state discourse across video-sharing sites. This article concludes with implications and recommendations for critical and comparative research toward a broadened and culturally nuanced notion of civic participation.

Keywords: emerging media; cyber vigilantism; civic participation; collective intelligence; transmediation; human flesh search; online social networks

As new media technologies have augmented the public's capacity to bypass or act on mass media (Castells, 2008), one of the contested areas of inquiry in the nexus of new media and political communication is the role of the Internet in facilitating governmental transparency and participatory democracy. The recent shift to "Web 2.0" (O'Reilly, 2005) and the rise of emerging media applications, including blogs, vlogs, social networking, and interactive forum sites and their attendant user-generated communication, have revitalized attention to the changing nature of information democratization and Asian political culture. Given the burgeoning growth in online connectivity to people and data, it is contended that "the Internet is not merely changing Asian societies, but is interacting with local cultures and societal structures across Asia to create new practices and communities of people sharing facets of their on- and off-line lives" (Herold, 2009, p. 89). In the case of the People's Republic of China, Web 2.0 media have accelerated the emergence of interactive forums that give voice to grassroots activists working to expose corrupt government administrations to public scrutiny (Zhu, Shang, & Hu, 2009). Such trends, the report further predicted, presage momentous developments of emerging media in China to facilitate and invigorate civic participation.

Within this context, this paper explores the role of emerging media in galvanizing civic collaboration in information seeking and the expression of alternative public

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opinions. Our article does not assume a technological determinism whereby emerging media autonomously beget political changes. Instead, we examine the sociotechnical factors related to emerging media used for political change since the Internet may enable civic discourse and provide the capability for the deterritorialization of knowledge and spontaneous engagement of interest-based communities to facilitate civic participation (Wellman et al., 2003).

Specifically, we investigate the phenomenon of cyber vigilantism, or *human flesh search*, in China, with a particular ambit to inspect the communication behaviors enabled by emerging media to unearth the previously obscure, anonymous, or protected personal data of social wrongdoers. Interest in the status of emerging media in China is well warranted, considering the exceptional swell in Internet access and connectivity over the last decade. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2009a), by 31 December 2009, the number of Chinese mainland Internet users and broadband users reached 384 million and 346 million, respectively. The number of Chinese bloggers has reached 182 million, and the latest statistics show that Chinese social network site users have reached 210 million by June 2010 (CNNIC, 2010).

Within this wired context, human flesh search, a literal translation from the Chinese nomenclature *renrou sousuo*, involves mediated search processes whereby online participants collectively find demographic and geographic information about deviant individuals, often with the shared intention to expose, shame, and punish them to reinstate legal justice or public morality. For example, on the Chinese version of Wikipedia, human flesh search refers to:

a mass movement of finding out personal information or the truth behind particular events. It uses the Internet as a medium, and gathers information partly through human labor to differentiate true and false sources and partly via information provided by anonymous insiders. The qualifier “flesh” indicates the important role of human intervention, which is distinct from conventional, algorithm-based mechanical searches. (Wikipedia Chinese version; translation by authors)

In China, the first widely publicized cyber manhunt was sparked in 2006 by the circulation of online videos showing a woman killing a kitten with her high heels. Enraged netizens posted the woman’s photograph online and urged people to track her down. This virtual collaboration soon brought to light the woman’s name and workplace, and led to her suspension from her workplace and a public apology (Netease, 2006). Recently, human flesh search has become an increasingly popular public recourse for identifying corrupt public officials, and has even entered the mainstream lexicon, including being rated among China’s top 10 catchphrases in 2008 (Zhang, 2009).

Recognizing the phrase’s growing popularity and functionality, Chinese search engines have been quick to acknowledge the nature of corporeal involvement and grassroots activism underlying this emerging form of cyber vigilantism. According to Baidu, China’s premium search engine, human flesh search is defined as “a mechanism for improving information quality provided by search engines via human participation. It is an intelligent search that requires the assistance of others” (Baidu encyclopedia; translation by authors). Similarly, Google China designates human flesh search as “a search experience, which applies modern information technology, and turns conventional online information retrieval into a community activity, which is characterized by close interpersonal relationships between online searchers”

(Google chinese version; translation by authors). Patently enough, on top of individual search endeavors, both definitions underscore the value of shared intelligence and communal cooperation, which implicate emerging media's interactive capabilities.

Indeed, as cyber vigilantism has become an intimate fabric of China's social awareness and daily discourse, the public has ridden on this technological wave to tighten their scrutiny of lawsuits, government officials, and policies (Wines, 2009). In 2009, online communication provided one-third of the original disclosures for 77 high-profile social events (Zhu et al., 2009). At the same time, privacy risks resulting from such cyber manhunts have been highlighted (Cheung, 2009a), with calls arising for a government-regulated system in which Internet service providers (ISPs) must provide prior notice of such searches or face shutdown (Cheung, 2009b). To keep abreast of the trend, the Chinese government has also devoted more attention to engaging public feedback online (Zhu et al., 2009).

Despite these recent interactions between new media and China's civil polity, there has been inadequate communication research into emerging media's interactive and collaborative behaviors that constitute human flesh search. One notable exception is an article by Herold (2008), which highlighted the ascending influence of a virtual civil society in China as "Chinese vigilantes" organize themselves to criticize and attack social transgressors within "an uneasy unofficial truce" with the government. Under this regime, netizens are permitted to criticize local issues and officials, while the central government screens only those discussions deemed to be overly sensitive or subversive. Thus, to deepen this promising line of social and media inquiry, this paper seeks to expand the conceptual scope of human flesh search by discussing the theoretical significance of collective intelligence across multiple types of digital media. In highlighting the intimate relationships between cyber vigilantism and significant emerging media characteristics, we exemplify such correlations via two case studies and conclude with critical reflections on and contributions to new media and civic participation praxis and theory.

Emerging media afford netizens the opportunity to participate in critical civic discourse by collaboratively constructing and sharing previously inaccessible information across multiple digital platforms. By facilitating changes in user-generated content and the production of knowledge within the public sphere, citizens can engage in new forms of civic participation as users construct, archive, tag, and edit news stories and political media content (Goode, 2009). According to Jenkins (2006), emerging media is associated with the promotion and enhancement of collective intelligence. Drawing upon Pierre Levy's seminal work *Collective Intelligence*, Jenkins argued that "cosmopedia" or online knowledge space facilitates the ease and speed of access, storage, and retrieval of information among networked members of interest-based groups to augment the social pool of existing knowledge.

Cyber vigilantism builds upon emerging media's interactive properties to support collective intelligence and the mediated spread of alternative knowledge across multiple platforms. Within a new media convergence culture, "consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). In the process, the identity of media audiences becomes more complex as online users simultaneously act as producers, distributors, and critics. They are a hybrid composition, or information "prosumers" and "produsers" (Bruns, 2008), thus potentially increasing the agency of laypersons in

finding, communicating, and circulating information about civic and political affairs. This new system of collective intelligence involves collaborative learning and inquiry-oriented processes, and has been associated with a higher level of critical awareness of the subject matter and more fully developed learning experiences (Exley, 2006). Admittedly, as Harrison and Barthel (2009) argued, the use of emerging media for critical inquiry is not new as prior media studies have shown how media audiences have historically participated in community radio and participatory public art projects. However, contemporary emerging media, these researchers stressed, considerably extends the scope of critical grassroots participation as Web 2.0 “now enable[s] vastly more users to experiment with a wider and seemingly more varied range of collaborative creative activities” (p. 174).

In light of digital media convergence, cyber vigilantism involves the transmediation of information across multiple media platforms as online participants engage with media and with each other to spread information and/or to create new texts. Transmedia storytelling and remediation processes (Bolter & Grusin, 2003) may strengthen civic engagement toward social change as online stories are widely disseminated for heightened publicity and extended media exposure (Rushkoff, 1996). Thus, the collation and circulation of information may advance in their original forms or in digital remixes and *mash-ups*. Mash-ups are, according to Jackson (2009), a “new archetype for communication” requiring further research since they “depend crucially on unceasing transformation and accumulation of communication acts and interaction into data” (p. 730). For the general public, consumer mash-ups are hybrid representations and derivative works from recombinant media and information sources.

Examining transmediation and the remix culture of digital content in online manhunt experiences is important since mash-ups have the potential to constitute (re)presentations of the “truth” (Meikle, 2008) and effect palpable changes in how the lay public perceives and remembers political authorities (Lessig, 2008). Moreover, more critical commentators of emerging media have urged investigation beyond popular Web 2.0 rhetoric (Everett & Mills, 2009) and called for more research in embedded contexts to investigate emerging media capabilities to support opportunities for critical engagement (Beer, 2008). Although Jenkins (2006) primarily examined collective intelligence and transmediation within the context of television entertainment and reality shows, his notions of online collective intelligence and user interactions across media platforms raise an interesting question about information-gathering processes that is closely related to recent developments in China’s human flesh search. Thus, our research question guiding this study is as follows: to what extent are emerging media appropriated by Chinese cyber vigilantes for new forms of civic participation via collective intelligence directed toward political purposes and the transmediation of alternative knowledge?

Cyber vigilantism in context: online search experiences in China

As in many countries, search engines afford the major means to help people retrieve most online information and have become influential in China, particularly among netizens with higher education and income levels. By June 2010, the number of Chinese Internet search engine users has reached 320, growing by 13.9% within half a year (CNNIC, 2010). Aside from the impressive growth figures, noteworthy for

China's online retrieval is its prospects for empowering information seeking to enhance civic discourse and invigorate the public sphere.

Yet in reality, the "pervasive information filtering" in China (OpenNet Initiative, 2009) poses opportunities and challenges for information retrieval via automated search engines by Chinese Internet users who wish to pursue controversial political issues. China's relationship with the Internet has historically been fraught with complex tensions and tight regulation of information flows that evolve with different media and social outcomes over time. The government's dual desires to reap the economic benefits of networked computing while maintaining control of online information have led to fluid gatekeeping and filtering guidelines. State control of the Chinese Internet technically includes the enforcement of ISP-blocked keywords and restricted physical access (Wu, 2007). What is deemed inappropriate or sensitive content is periodically redefined and regulations seasonally enforced depending on political circumstances (Hong, 2010). Due to the fluidity in the government's statutory controls over Internet content, the dramatic growth of emerging media and their Web-based applications opens up interesting possibilities for new media appropriation.

Computer-mediated communication does not operate in a cultural vacuum. This applies to new and emerging media situated in local contexts, shaped by their users, and calibrated for specific social needs (Kling, 2000). As Mackay and Gillespie (1992) argued, people "may reject technologies, redefine their functional purpose, customize, or even invest idiosyncratic symbolic meanings in them" (p. 699). Thus, emerging media may be appropriated within ethnic enclaves and reinvented in ways that catalyze cyber vigilantism, grassroots resistance, and even social change.

For Chinese netizens, appropriation of Web-based technologies to search for controversial information can take many forms, including collaborative endeavors to circumvent government censorship with networked tactics of resistance (de Certeau, 1984), which entail the presence and willing partnership of other peers functioning in online and offline spaces. For example, Cheong and Poon (2009) highlighted ways in which Canadian Chinese migrants sent "non-e-mails" (with only attachments and no actual e-mail content) to their counterparts in China to escape official censorship that relies on automated horizontal scanning of Chinese characters and blockage of e-mail contents not aligned with government doctrines. Moreover, Chinese netizens obtain indirect access to sensitive information from their "religious *guanxi* networks" with acquaintances and strangers who download online content on to CDs and transport them into China (Cheong & Poon, 2009).

In the face of online information gaps and strong media regulation, the recent adoption of social media, according to prominent Chinese blogger pioneer Isaac Mao (2009), forms the new foundation for "sharism" in China through which the "co-computing of people, networks, and machines" helps establish a networked system to spread information. Therefore, it is timely and pertinent to investigate how the various forms of emerging media are utilized by Chinese netizens for information relay and collective intelligence within the contemporary Chinese political and social milieu.

In particular, the focus here is on human flesh search processes directed toward identifying corrupt officials, in the wake of a growing civic consciousness that has become increasingly assertive against government corruption. In one recent survey, 82.3% of Chinese respondents said that corruption was the most serious problem that

would not be tolerated by the public in the next decade (“Diao cha”, 2009). Another poll asked the public what problems most affect China’s international image, and 59.2% picked official corruption (“Nin ren”, 2010). He (2000) argued that corruption has become a key social and political issue since 1978 when Chinese authorities initiated the policy of reform and opening up. The Chinese notion of corruption involves the “use of public authority and public resources for private interests” (*Yi Quan Mou Si*) and is perceived as particularly erosive and socially repulsive. Therefore, vigorous anticorruption campaigns by the Chinese Communist Party Central Disciplinary Committee and the implementation of a “moral education” movement have consistently renewed civic interest in stemming the abuse of power by public officials (He, 2000).

In sum, the foregoing review presents a confluence of multiple factors related to emerging media’s potential to support cyber vigilantism and the inchoate trends in China, which provide a fertile ground for a contextual investigation of the democratic potential of emerging media. In the subsequent sections, we will examine how Chinese netizens recently appropriated emerging media and negotiated their information-seeking practices to safeguard legal justice and public morality in the face of official corruption and social transgression.

The mediated manhunt: examining the communicative practices of human flesh search

To broaden our knowledge of emerging social and political phenomena, case studies provide rich contextual details to understand the processes and causes underlying contemporary events within the real-life contexts (Yin, 2008). In light of the relatively new occurrence of human flesh search, a case study provides empirical grounding and allows us to develop a higher level of conceptual validity (George & Bennett, 2005) on the novel notions of collective intelligence and transmedia civic collaboration, as reflected by emerging media adoption amid China’s political and social context.

To such ends, we selected two cases based on an information-orientation selection (Flyvbjerg, 2006), for extreme cases such as ours were expected to yield maximum heuristic content. Both cases were recent, well-publicized events that represent successful anticorruption endeavors, occurring between 2008 and 2009 at significant geographic locales in China (Shenzhen and Shanghai) that are highly developed economic and technological hubs, chosen in order to provide in-depth descriptions and meaningful explanations of emerging media appropriations. We drew upon multiple sources of evidence to delineate the trajectory of cyber vigilantism to develop converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2008) via a process of data triangulation. Since vital information may not be readily available in one medium or within China’s highly regulated media milieu, we conducted a thorough review of documentary evidence, including more than 100 hours of ethnographic observations of textual, audio, and visual content ranging from newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, websites, and public forums to social media sites, within China and abroad, to obtain a more balanced, accurate picture of cyber manhunts’ dynamics. Much of the data also came through following hyperlinks that reflect the archival and web-like nature of electronic media. Through careful process tracing of our chronologically catalogued print sources and electronic records (George & Bennett, 2005), we observed how media reports about human flesh searches unfolded and developed a reliable account of civic participation and transmedia storytelling. The researchers, who are bilingual

Asian scholars, reviewed the data in Chinese and English. When citing quotations from the sources, we have reproduced the original meaning of the content as faithfully as possible when the primary language was Chinese.

Case one: flesh search for the mayor/molester

On 29 October 2008, at a restaurant in Shenzhen, in Guangdong province, a middle-aged man asked an 11-year-old girl to show him to the toilet but then tried to pull her violently into the men's room. The girl managed to escape his grasp and recounted the incident to her parents, who subsequently confronted the man. Upon questioning, the man was unapologetic and brazenly announced that he was a senior, mayor-level official appointed by the Ministry of Transport (MOT) in Beijing, and thus he was unconcerned about the alleged sexual harassment charges. The girl's parents called the Shenzhen Municipal Public Security Bureau emergency service and reported the incident.

The event was first disclosed by the local website Southcn.com (a comprehensive online news portal in Guangdong province) the next day, and quickly spread beyond the region to gain national attention when prominent online media, including Sina.com (one of China's leading news portals with more than 35.6 billion weekly visitors), Chinanews.com, and MSN China, picked up the incident. Most reports headlined the story "A Self-proclaimed Mayor Accused of Child Molestation," and included photo screen shots and 15-second videos of the conflict captured by the restaurant's monitor, which replayed the man's vocal abuse and physical threats against the victim's parents. Many reports also cited the man's words verbatim to stress his hauteur, such as his unabashed self-disclosure ("I'm a senior official appointed by the Ministry of Transport, enjoying the same rank as this city's mayor. You want to sue me? No way!"); his obnoxious condescension ("I've done that, so what? How much money do you want? Give me a price!"); and his blatant bullying ("You people are all trash! Want to find trouble with me? I'll fix you!").

Within a few days of the incident, many emerging media portals, including Ku6.com (the Cool 6 network, a leading video news-sharing and user-generated content platform with millions of videos created by Chinese prosumers), hosted 285 video clips on the episode, with its three most watched videos related to this incident, which altogether were viewed more than 210,000 times. These video clips were subsequently circulated on the Internet, and were uploaded by netizens on to other popular vlog sites, including tudou.com, 56.com, 6.cn, and youku.com.

In spite of the local authorities' efforts to downplay the incident and official gag orders given to the restaurant staff, who were warned not to accept any interviews (Huang, Yuan, & Li, 2008), cyber vigilantism quickly took off as enraged netizens sought to uncover the identity of the perpetrator. Online participants started to connect and communicate with each other to search for his personal information. According to Lan (2009), the human flesh search was commenced the next day (30 October) by a netizen named Derek/Feifeifei who posted a video clip on his blog and called for the public to bring the man to justice. Within an hour of the online disclosure, the video had been viewed by more than 200,000 readers and commented on by more than 200 people, thus multiplying its media visibility. The local media followed with more on-site details. Many forum interactions ensued as netizens shared and verified personal data about the protagonist's identity. Remarkably, some

netizens even went to the same restaurant to gather material evidence. Two days later (31 October), the perpetrator was identified as Jiaxiang Lin, deputy director-general and party secretary of the Shenzhen Maritime Affairs Bureau (SMAB) under the MOT. Ironically, it was uncovered that Lin also served as the head of the Bureau's Disciplinary Committee. Meanwhile, more of Lin's private details, such as his vehicle and cell phone numbers, birthplace, and alma mater, were also posted online by keen netizens (Geng, 2008).

It appeared that public scrutiny afforded by various emerging media and regional news media platforms led to the swift execution of anticorruption pursuance. On 1 November, the SMAB announced Lin's suspension and apologized to the public for his misdemeanor and the negative impact on the Bureau's institutional reputation. On 4 November, the MOT declared that Lin had been stripped of all administrative and party responsibilities; it would mete out further punishment pending subsequent investigation into his misbehavior.

Aside from motivating the initial inquiry and disciplinary pursuit, cyber vigilantism also energized online discussions and sparked subsequent waves of civic engagement in pursuit of rightful compensation for the victim. On 5 November, the Shenzhen Police Department announced that Lin's misbehavior resulted from his drunkenness and should be defined as an act of inebriation, instead of a sexual assault. Such a self-exculpatory assessment was quickly condemned as a cover-up by netizens, as evidenced by an online poll in which more than 95% of 2,000 participants surveyed were "enraged" by this "selective-justice" decision, and called for civic mobilization to gather more evidence to punish the culprit (Yang, 2008). Meanwhile, on 6 November, the MOT issued a ministerial circular, instructing its staff to exercise restraint and draw useful lessons from this incident. Mass opinion online was again mostly critical of the perfunctory and bureaucratic solution, and demanded further monetary compensation and an open apology from Lin.

Altogether, more than 1.8 million comments were voiced on this matter, and the netizens' critiques focused on their loss of faith in the state's administration of justice and its public credibility (Guo, Ji, & Huang, 2009). For example, Henjun Yang, a well-known Chinese writer and blogger (2009) observed, "Though President Hu Jintao recently defined the Chinese people as the core of the CCP Government's work, this maritime senior official has shattered our optimistic expectations with his curt revelation 'You people are all trash!'" One netizen named Passer-by added, "The government often points to the people as the uncivilized mob, yet it turns out that the government have so many officials like 'Jiaxiang Lin' among its rank and files". In response to Sina.com's reports on the government's manipulation of news reports, a Beijing netizen sarcastically noted, "Since the government controls the right of speech, they may portray this matter as they like and fool themselves as they wish". Another netizen from Zhejiang province criticized the corruption misconduct: "Lin's act is a crime! How can he be shielded from legal punishment by merely forfeiting his administrative ranks? This is not fair for ordinary citizens! What if the perpetrator has no bureaucratic title?"

Furthermore, transmedia storytelling of this episode percolated with the proliferation of mash-ups that were political parodies created by online citizens who invented memorable slogans and satirical catchphrases, such as, "Beware of helping those weird uncles!" and "The party secretary is coming! Run, daughter, run!" Video mockeries were no less vitriolic and were wildly disseminated among

thousands of netizens, further alerting public attention to this case. One vlog on Ku6.com titled “Obama: I Want to Work in China” was a mash-up video utilizing a clip of US President Obama’s election address. In this online video, which drew more than 50,000 views, Obama was portrayed as quitting his presidential campaign in order to compete for Lin’s post (as the party secretary) in China, because, in stark contrast to an American president’s mandatory accountability to the public, Lin’s job brings unrestrained privileges, including the liberty to harass an 11-year-old child (Kuliushanzhai, 2009). Another video on Sohu.com, which received more than 123,930 views, simulated a senseless conversation between two mental inmates who mumbled all sorts of ridiculous excuses for Lin’s misbehavior (Tina, 2008).

Case two: search for corrupt diaoyu traffic administrators

On 14 October 2009, in Pudong New District, Shanghai, van driver Zhongjie Sun, who was on his way home, was stopped by a man who requested a ride. As it was too late at night to find public transportation, Sun agreed to take the man. The passenger offered to pay RMB 10 yuan for the ride, but Sun declined. After Sun had driven a short distance, the passenger suddenly stepped on the brake, snatched the van key, and jumped out of the vehicle. Then a group of men surrounded the van and asked Sun to show his business permit for passenger transportation. The previous passenger then accused Sun of engaging in illegal passenger service (locally known as the growing “black cab business” that competes with registered cabs for customers) (Liu, 2009). Despite Sun’s insistence of his innocence, his cell phone was taken away, he was not allowed to call the police, and he was compelled to sign a document to validate the confiscation of his vehicle.

This matter might have passed without public awareness. Yet because of Sun’s impulsive gesture of protest, cutting off his little finger to prove his innocence after this injustice (Gu, Liu, & Zhang, 2009), Sun’s brother asked several newspapers to report on this incident. Two days later, his story received widespread coverage on various online news media and emerging media platforms. Sina.com cited Shanghai media’s report on its news portal, which immediately drew more than 2,000 sympathetic responses to Sun’s experience and indignant comments against the traffic authorities. Sina.com and Tianya.com also posted an online video interview with Sun, who recounted how his kindness was not reciprocated. These online reports raised the possibility of corrupt law enforcement practices by traffic officers, who were trying to *diaoyu* (intentionally hook people into a trap via “fishing expeditions”) in order to impose heavy disciplinary fines on the innocent drivers. With regard to the Sina’s report, most of the 2,405 readers posted strong critiques against such practices, while on Tianya, a staggering 457,009 comments were posted, and 5,260 responses voiced their concerns about this malpractice and similar corrupt administrative practices within Shanghai and beyond.

On 17 October, under the weight of heated public pressure, the Shanghai Municipal Government (SMG) stressed that the passenger transportation market must be administered in a legal, civilized manner. The SMG also instructed the Pudong New District Government (PNDG) to promptly investigate the case and publicize the result as soon as possible (W.T. Zhu, 2009). On 20 October, the District Traffic Administration Bureau (DAB) under the PNDG concluded from its investigations that Sun had engaged in illegal passenger transportation, and that all

the evidence gathered was valid and appropriate without the use of any illegal means or the alleged *diaoyu* practice (Pu, 2009).

This grossly biased verdict promptly led to a broader surge of public criticism, media scrutiny, and cyber vigilantism against the DAB and its staff. Many national and regional media quoted an online survey, in which 51% netizens viewed the verdict as a cover-up decision by the PNDG in defense of its subsidiary the DAB, 41% thought the investigation should be redone, and only 2% believed in the PNDG (Xu, 2009). In particular, Jianjiang Li, Party member of the Construction and Traffic Committee under the PNDG, became a focal target of public outrage, as he categorically denied any possibility of wrongdoings such as the *diaoyu* practices, and refused to provide the identification of the bait-man “passengers” who were secretly employed to assist the authorities in identifying “illegal black cabs” (Xu, 2009). Consequently, many netizens assumed the role of cyber vigilantes on public forums and personal blogs as they tried to uncover this official’s personal information (including his financial benefit from imposing illegal fines via such corrupt *diaoyu* tricks), and the identity of the bait-man passengers in disguise (Zhu, 2009). Under intense civic surveillance, many users of online social media and public forums finally located the DAB’s 2008 administration summary (Sedadelama, 2009) that indicated that the DAB had collected more than RMB 50 million yuan from its “fines” over black cabs from 2007 to 2008. Though this report was quickly removed from the DAB’s website, a new round of enhanced interrogation by netizens had already set in (Tyting, 2009).

On 26 October, through persistent collective searching by the public via intense exchanges on online public forums and verification by journalist bloggers, searchers found that the bait-man passenger had actually been hired a day before the incident and was instructed in his role by his boss, who, under DAB’s instructions, attempted to trap drivers at specific sections of road. Consequently, Sun wound up as a victim (Chen, 2009). In light of the compelling evidence and increasing publicity, the PNDG decided to reverse the DAB’s verdict, which, in the PNDG’s words, “grossly wronged Sun, misled the media and the public, and affected Shanghai’s national and international image” (Shen, 2009). The PNDG then set up a new joint investigation team, composed of 12 members from the Shanghai municipal legislature and media, community, and industry representatives (Zhang, 2009). On 27 October, the PNDG held a press conference, announcing that the DAB had employed “inappropriate means” of collecting evidence and would revoke its decision on Sun’s case, together with appropriate financial compensation. Liang Jiang, the head of the PNDG, also apologized to the public at the Shanghai Municipal Government’s executive meeting (Zhang, 2009). On 11 November, Zhengsheng Yu, Party secretary of the Shanghai Chinese Communist Party Committee and the *de facto* highest official in the city, pointed out that such “*diaoyu*-style” enforcement was “definitely wrong” (Tian, 2009).

Despite his traumatic experiences, Sun later issued an open letter, calling on all drivers to extend help to other bystanders in need of a free ride (Lin & Zhang, 2009). Though he was a migrant worker from Henan province (a less developed area of China), and was not technologically savvy, he opened a personal blog on Sina.com to express his gratitude for the “tremendous online support” he received from fellow netizens during his struggle with the local government. In his blog posts, he stressed that his exoneration was not just his personal victory but also the public’s (Sun, 2009).

In this case, cyber vigilantes publicized *diaoyu* practices across the country, catapulting the issue into national prominence. In the latest *2009 China Internet Analysis Report on the Public Opinion* (“Diao cha”, 2009), which ranked the top 10 issues discussed on China’s top five online communities, this case (known as the Shanghai traffic authorities’ *diaoyu* practices) ranked fourth, and elicited 11,453 comments from netizens on Tianya, Kaidi Community, the Qiangguo Forum, the Sina Forum, and the Tianshui Forum. Moreover, public reflections continued to pour in with diverse transmedia representations of online audio and video productions. On 56.com, a video clip posted by Xuejiu (2009) used the tune from a popular Chinese pop song and changed its name from “The Price of Love” to “The Price of Kindness”. This mash-up video attracted more 71,000 views, and its scathing lyrics interrogate the corrupt Shanghai transportation officials with such sarcastic lines as “In a country which advocates learning from the (exemplary soldier) Lei Feng, such an injustice wrought on kindness is whose shame, disgrace and embarrassment?” A video clip posted by God-give-me-power (2009) simulated *diaoyu* practices on a university campus, and hinted that traffic enforcement officers should go to hell because they were so greedy as to accept the false paper money intended as a sacrificial offering for the dead. Another clip parodied a theme song (75,195 views) for *diaoyu* practices, and its lyrics poked fun at the ridiculous traffic authorities whose folly compels drivers to either ignore roadside appeals for help or switch to riding bicycles just to be safe (Anhui Satellite TV, 2009).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper explored the phenomenon of cyber vigilantism as a mediated communication process for further understanding of emerging media use and its implications for civic life in China. Our study highlighted various ways whereby social affordances of emerging media were creatively appropriated by Chinese netizens to assert critical civic voices in upholding public morality transgressed by corrupt government authorities.

In particular, our research points to interesting findings that illuminate emerging media’s capabilities to facilitate changes in civic participation. As illustrated in both cases, emerging media provide the interactive and instructive spaces to support criticism, debate, and expression of alternative public opinions from official accounts. By harnessing knowledge and communication among voluntary pools of online netizens, human flesh search culminated in the exposure, collection, and circulation of personal data of corrupt officials, who could otherwise have escaped their due punishment but were criminalized by civic discourse and eventually prosecuted. In our cases, collective intelligence and transmediated information sharing across platforms mobilized and channeled public attention and resources to reinstate justice for everyday lay victims afflicted by the power abuses of individual officials or administrative authorities.

Emerging media, particularly video-sharing and social networking platforms, facilitated the creation and circulation of individual netizens’ original texts and improvised media content targeted at particular deviant officials. Specifically, transmediated storytelling expedited the widespread publicity of novel media mash-ups of political parodies that further exposed the perpetrators’ notoriety to public scrutiny and legal intervention. While the full range of transmediation

practices was practically impossible to capture in a single study, here we observed that the spread of alternative media stories helped subvert and challenge government discourse. In this way, the mediatized rituals (Cottle, 2006) of cyber vigilantism work to “open up productive spaces for social reflexivity and critique” and thus “can be politically disruptive or even transformative in their reverberations within civil and wider society” (p. 411).

Furthermore, beyond these circumstantial findings, the analysis in this paper provides heuristic insights for theorizing emerging media from a comparative communication perspective. Though China’s mediated process of human flesh search may differ from non-Chinese experiences of new and emerging media in significant ways, this process can stimulate analogous experiences of civic participation and cyber vigilantism in other wired contexts beyond China. Thus, we conclude this paper by sharing several ways in which our research contributes to the understanding of emerging media and recommend some fruitful directions for future research.

First, our analysis of human flesh search processes by Chinese netizens foregrounds some prospects for mediated innovations that contrast conventional (predominantly North American) conditions surrounding Internet use. The individualistic, autonomous use of search engines within a relatively free online media environment is often assumed to be the *de facto* experience of digital information retrieval. However, our discussion above highlights that the rising popularity of online search engine use does not automatically displace the necessity of human collaboration and the importance of civic community, especially when political restrictions constrain the capacity for information quality and retrieval online.

By leveraging knowledge and social relationships among a voluntary pool of netizens in the production and collaboration of data across interrelated, interactive media, cyber vigilantism can enrich the depth of knowledge construction via conventional search engines. Indeed, Zook and Graham (2007) have argued that automated search engines such as Google may ironically lead to the “enclosing of the Internet commons” (p. 1322) as these search engines are limited in several ways. They cannot ferret out information that is stored offline or insulated from public access, are susceptible to manipulation and distortion as their proprietary ranking algorithms may lead to biased filtering of search results, and cannot ensure comprehensive background information, adequate contextual interpretation, and objective causal reasoning of specific issues, which may be beyond average users’ ability to assess. In this sense, human flesh search processes provide an alternative method of information retrieval in China’s restricted media landscape and a snapshot of emerging media’s empowering potential to enhance collective intelligence for critical civic participation.

Moreover, our interest here in the social appropriation of emerging media further suggests that the communicative process of human flesh search is enabled by creative and collaborative tactics of “making do” (de Certeau, 1984), which depends on cultural practices that have historically characterized information-sharing practices in China. Recent intercultural communication literature attests to the enduring importance of certain cultural beliefs amid China’s evolving social and technological climate. This literature suggests that China’s high-context collectivism, Confucian dynamism, and *guanxi* (relational networking) provide a cultural context for new media adoption, including the creation of intense “hypersocial” networks (Banfe, 2008) and mediated information sharing practices (Shin, Ishman, & Sanders, 2007).

Conceivably, relational connectivity and personal allegiance to group interests encourage netizens to act as online intermediaries to integrate and disseminate information for social critique and political supervision. To the extent that this study points to the collective efforts by Chinese cyber vigilantes to engage new media in civic engagement, there are compelling reasons to study how social norms and cultural values in other contexts shape emerging media's functions and their implications for polity and policy.

Second, we note that as emerging media are evolving, alternative and less democratic outcomes of cyber vigilantism can exist. Here, our investigation is limited to two extreme cases representing the emancipatory potential of emerging media, and which may not be applicable to all human flesh search cases. Future studies should expand this exploratory line of research to more cases, and employ other methods, for example, interviews with online participants who act as cyber vigilantes or information administrators who operate as media gatekeepers, in order to more fully comprehend the perceived and actual capabilities of emerging media to support critical citizen engagement. Future research could also track the longitudinal development of cyber vigilantism to examine the open-ended and dialectical social transformation of digital media storytelling (Couldry, 2008) over different media platforms overtime.

Furthermore, it is important that we do not overlook powerful vested interests that can affect the emerging media landscape (Beer, 2008) and restrict the potential of user-generated communication to catalyze change (Van Dijck, 2009); for example, China's censorship and politics-oriented legal institutions that might stunt the democratic potential of online civic participation. We note that dramatic human flesh search processes in China have transpired in the last few years without being subject to heavy political or legal intervention from the government, but recent developments pushing for individual privacy enforcement may alter the media terrain in which future cyber vigilantism will operate. For example, Cheung (2009a) documented the first human flesh search case in a Chinese court associated with liability in December 2008, when the court passed a disciplinary verdict upon two websites that violated personal privacy and reputation rights. In January 2009, Xuzhou city in Jiangsu province became the first jurisdiction to prohibit the dissemination of people's personal information online (Yu, 2009), and in March, the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress approved an amendment to the criminal law that would punish government and corporate employees with access to personal data who illegally obtain, sell, or leak such information (Wei & Cui, 2009). Therefore, depending on the extent to which legal sanctions are modified to protect those who feel victimized by cyber vigilantism, the nature, scope and consequence of human flesh search in particular and emerging media in general may evolve in the future to adapt to political exigencies and legal specifications.

As technoculture changes work toward the "refocusing of politics on everyday life" (Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 93), it would be interesting for researchers to investigate the banal and diverse ways in which emerging media are appropriated within different political systems. Future research could examine the causes and consequences of the temporal lag between emerging media's developments and government interventions, including the critical "detours" of Web 2.0 and the indeterminacy that results from its technical and cultural ensemble (Everitt & Mills, 2009). Traversing the terrain of civic participation, cultural manifestations, and

politico-legal interactions, such an expansive scope of productive investigation into emerging media would contribute to an enlarged conceptualization of civic participation and, more importantly, a culturally nuanced understanding of emerging media operant within the increasingly mediated landscape of our contemporary world.

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