The China File: Searching for ways to sustain foreign reporting
By Maureen Fan

SUMMARY

For my Knight project, I began with the admittedly lofty and vague goal of wanting to help preserve quality foreign correspondence – possibly through collaboration.

When I applied for the fellowship in early 2009, I saw shrinking stories and foreign bureaus, more dependence on wire reports and less ambitious enterprise – at least the kind that inspired me to become a journalist, more than 20 years ago.

At the same time, I thought there was a more complete picture of China in the collective news media than many Americans seemed to be getting.

I decided to prototype a China site that combined curated aggregation, original blog posts and community-driven content. My project was a reporting process. This paper outlines the feedback I received, questions that need more exploration and my ideas on how I would create a China site, perhaps called China File. It would have to be sustained by multiple partners and sources of revenue.

I found agreement in the need for more insightful and deeper China coverage, as well as an easier way of displaying and distributing it. I believe enough people are interested in these kinds of stories that the right combination of models, partners and staff would find a supportive audience that would partly pay for some content and sustain a lean operation. Various models, including philanthropic support, should be tested.

There are some downsides to producing what’s most popular and to targeting the paying business elite, but the only way to truly test demand is to produce a stellar product, preferably with Chinese partners and built-in incentives to encourage the best original on-the-ground reporting possible, even if one has to start modestly.

CURATION
My premise changed from collaboration— which is taking place incrementally—to curation, because so many people said they wouldn’t pay for news but might pay to save time.

By quality foreign correspondence, I mean stories with more insight and surprise; compelling narratives that connect readers to faraway regions; deeper dives; articles that place China’s rise and social change in context; and more accountability reporting. In short, the kind of journalism that is harder to find as sites focus on aggregating news found elsewhere or emphasizing what’s most popular in order to attract traffic.

The rich online resources now available to anyone following China (including terrific translation sites and blogs) are often better at quick slice of life stories and Chinese reaction than traditional print media. They offer a more entertaining window onto serious issues such as the abuse of power and China’s wealth gap, with new arrivals every few months, such as China Divide, which focuses on social and political commentary.

These sites are not yet, however, a substitute for the on the ground reporting and analysis that experienced journalists can but do not always apply to a story.

IMAGE PROBLEM: WE DON’T NEED YOU

This failing by experienced journalists came up repeatedly in interviews and seminars on the future of journalism. Technologists, pundits and journalists criticized the mainstream media’s failure to deliver crucial and fair content, praising online sources instead for being faster to question authority (this criticism isn’t new, but it’s a factor in rethinking better ways to deliver news).

“I read some of these romanticized pieces about the shining palaces of journalism that we’re losing,” said Richard Gingras, CEO of the Salon Media Group, in a talk to the Knight Fellows. “Bullshit. Mainstream media journalism is not what it is often portrayed to be in a number of key ways.”

Mainstream media has lost its inclination to challenge powerful institutions, whether the White House during the run-up to the Iraq war or Wall Street on the financial crisis, Gingras said. Academics and bloggers such as Salon’s Glenn

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1 The Financial Times uses Iraq and Afghanistan coverage from the Washington Post, which in turn gets stories from the FT’s Southeast Asia correspondent.
2 “What I’m paying for is discovery. Not the content, because excuse me, I can get that content for free. What unique content are you providing me? You’re not, you’re just making my life easier.” - Silicon Valley digital media executive.
3 See examples of quality foreign correspondence in Attachment A, a partial list.
4 See examples of China blogs and translations sites in Attachment B, a partial list.
Greenwald are far more likely to ask tough questions, he said.

“The accountability journalism that people talk about, it was never even close to being pervasive,” said Dan Gillmor, director of the Knight Center for Digital Media Entrepreneurship at Arizona State University and a former San Jose Mercury News columnist, at a Future of Journalism conference at Stanford Law School in May.

Others, including Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who seem to value foreign correspondence primarily as spot news, cited the Haiti earthquake in January or the 2008 Mumbai attacks as evidence that they didn’t need mainstream media. With Twitter, they said, “we don’t need you.”

David Bandurski, with the China Media Project at Hong Kong University, increasingly sees a stream of newswire copy written by informed reporters he knows personally but topped with lousy headlines written from New York, gutted of nuance or sourced only by Xinhua or other state media. In terms of offering value-added professional news content, he said, “you might as well say that it goes in as crap and comes out as crap.”

In an email exchange, Bandurski said he was convinced he could compete with all three newswires at once, just by sitting at his desk, “if what they’re looking for is this kind of content.” He has a direct Delicious feed on his site. When he comes across something interesting in Chinese, he bookmarks it and in the Delicious window that opens up, he translates and summarizes it as he reads. “I create a news brief, with a link to the Chinese (which AP/AFP/Reuters never give you) that appears on my site instantly. I do three or four a day, which takes me 15 minutes in the morning. So in a full-time day, I could do anywhere from 60 to 100 of them.”

In interviews, students in my Design School and Graduate School of Business classes said they consumed news on their mobile phones, often from sources such as Digg or Delicious. Two entrepreneurs suggested I re-design foreign correspondence as a series of Twitter feeds, with real-time video.

Had I gone done this path, I would have adopted the Design School’s process: determining through interviews what people truly want or need, prototyping it, testing it repeatedly and failing as early and as often as possible. Based on early interviews, possible directions were sharply condensed summaries for mobile use or stories directly tied to American jobs, American food safety and other “localized” angles.

I did think about trying this in a “Designing Media That Matters” class that turned out to be over-subscribed. I agree that trends in changing news consumption need

to be taken seriously and explored (also touched on in conversations with Stanford professor Clifford Nass). By contrast, however, the Virginia Quarterly Review published online Sixty Hours of Terror, a 20,000-word recreation of the Mumbai attacks a year after the assault. It won a National Magazine Award. Editor Ted Genoways wrote that he hoped to prove readers were still hungry for original, long-form reporting. He concluded that to sustain it, “altruistic supporters” need to be found, “who see this kind of work as important, whether it’s profit-generating or not.”

Stanford law professor Joshua Cohen has also argued that there is not yet a viable alternative to investigative newspaper journalism. “We cannot have a successfully democratic public sphere without the kinds of information that newspapers have supplied,” Cohen argued at the Future of Journalism conference, adding that the blogosphere is no match in terms of investigative resources, legal-defense capacity or training. “Call me old-fashioned, but poetry, philosophy, physics, and investigative journalism cannot be blogged and crowd-sourced.” He was nearly, but not quite, booed.

In China, Danwei, one of the oldest and most reliable translation blogs, has moved away from shorter translations of Chinese media stories and “off the wall” subjects to longer translations, including weekday summaries of the front page of a Chinese newspaper. “The stories that people continue linking to, long after they have been published, are usually long pieces with original research and reporting, particularly some of the contributions from writers who don’t work for Danwei,” founder Jeremy Goldkorn said in a June 30 interview with China Beat, referring to a 7,464-word post on Chinese humor.

While there’s no reason in-depth reporting can’t be paired with shorter bursts of attention-grabbing news, the question is how to pay for it (more on this later) and how to provide “sense-making,” so as not to magnify the echo chamber effect.

“Although we get exposed to exponentially more sources of information on Twitter, that doesn’t mean we’re getting more information or a diversity of information,” said Gady Epstein, Beijing Bureau Chief for Forbes magazine. “As journalists, we’re tasked with adding our ‘distinctive take’ to that homogenized stream of traffic, at the

8 For other references to declines in foreign reporting see Appendix C.
risk of losing the actual distinctiveness we used to thrive on as dead-trees journalists.”

INNOVATION ELSEWHERE

Whether one agrees with shorter and faster, it's difficult to escape the sense in Silicon Valley that traditional newsrooms are not moving quickly nor creatively enough to fix their business models and better engage readers.

New trends outside these newsrooms include hiring largely unpaid writers and gathering story ideas by algorithm. I’m told the economics of advertising and current business models make these experiments non-negotiable.

What might China story ideas might look like if crowd-sourced by a mainland Chinese audience? China has issues with online vigilantism, where people known as “human flesh search engines” conduct online research to ferret out and humiliate those suspected of fraud, infidelity or arrogance. But is there an innovative and interactive way to educate US readers about what the Chinese online public is thinking about?

What if queries centered on protests such as the June 2008 riot in southwest Guizhou province? Tens of thousands protested an alleged cover-up of the mysterious death of a teenaged girl. Internet accounts – deleted by censors as they were posted and re-posted – showed scorched and overturned police cars and thousands of protestors. Blogger Roland Soong provides a fascinating deconstruction of clashing accounts, a good lesson in the value of on-the-ground reporting after an incident has happened, and in the role of rumor and censorship in China. China File readers would, I think, want to better understand this unrest.

As I thought about how new media strategies might help showcase the best examples of foreign correspondence, I hit bumps trying to identify a market or business plan.

OBSTACLE: REVENUE MODEL?

Alan Mutter, a startup veteran and former managing editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, emphasized the most crucial first steps in his entrepreneurial journalism class at UC Berkeley: identifying who will buy your product, why they will buy it, where you will sell it, how you will make money and when you will make money.

His friend, marketing expert Ridgley Evers, of Establishment Capital Partners,

9 See Appendix D for more discussion and examples.
narrowed it down further: what are you selling, to whom and why in the world would they buy it from you? Often, your idea is already available in other forms, Evers said, which “is where the wheels fall off of every plan you see.”

Accordingly, some said I should focus on new venture formation or tech startups in China and content for Americans doing business in China. I see the clear demand for business news, but I’m not sure that this is where the vacuum is.

“People are spending more time on economic news and less time on Kremlinology, which runs the risk of presenting China as a post-political story, which, of course, it's not,” said Evan Osnos, staff writer for the New Yorker in Beijing.

Osnos noted that China is actually a bright spot in the overall decline of foreign reporting: The Tribune, Cox, Washington Post and AP bureaus have shrunk in the last five years, but the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg bureaus have grown.

While there is no under-reporting of business news from China, there is a lack of quality, Nick Lardy of the Peterson Institute said. “You get swings of coverage that far exceed what’s going on, on the ground,” he said on the sidelines of a Stanford panel on colliding US-China interests. “If it’s as bad as it is, why is China still getting $100 billion in foreign direct investment? It’s quite misleading.”

How would a business site best battle the hype? How would it deal with the criticism that many experts pull their punches, reluctant to offend China? How would it be any different from everyone else covering business news?

Former BusinessWeek executive editor John Byrne now runs C-Change, a digital media company focused on content about business schools but soon to branch out to other topics that interest MBAs, including China. Byrne believes that print advertising won’t come back, that online advertising won’t offset it and that consumers won’t pay for news. His MBA site, Poets & Quants, will feature original stories, curation and community-generated content. Revenue will come from a variety of content-related products and services for people pursuing MBAs.

Will executives pay for tailored China queries, perhaps about Chinese corporate efficiency, that can be answered by reporters? Can a small staff produce a unique enough service for paying customers, while writing free stories for everyone else?

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I was also encouraged to think about the Chinese American market, or overseas Chinese, both broad groups that deserve more study (there are 2 million Chinese-Americans in California; China follows Mexico in terms of new U.S. immigrants).13

Sandy Close, executive director of New America Media, found that they were much better than the government at designing Census 2000 ads targeting Native Americans. Her collection of ethnic media organizations got paid for creating the ads as well as running them. Xiao Qiang, founder of the Berkeley-based translation site China Digital Times, said that with improved technology and more ways around censors, mainland Chinese readers were the audience to chase.14

Meanwhile, Beijing has launched a $6.6 billion expansion of state-controlled media to counter the predominant Western interpretations of China news. Officials are pouring millions into English-language newspapers and radio stations all over the world and beefing up the bureaus of the official New China News Agency.15

PROTOTYPE

I decided to prototype a China site that showcased for US readers the best news and information regardless of publication. In addition to curated aggregation, it would feature original blog posts and create value in sharing ideas, articles and questions among its members. It would feature local voices and direct dialogue if possible, between Chinese and Western journalists.

The goal would be to reduce the fire hose of China news to something compelling and relevant for busy people with an interest in China but not the time to search dozens of news sites and services. China File would tell readers what matters and why.

An early prototype involved adding my favorite URLs into aggregator software by Lingospot, thanks to help from Pankaj Paul, the former manager of digital content development for Gannett Digital. The result (Fig. 1), however, was too busy. I also experimented with a WordPress template, but couldn’t deliver the functions I wanted to test.

The target audience would be China or Asia watchers: academics and teachers, business people such as entrepreneurs, deal seekers and business development executives, government officials and staff, members of think tanks and non-governmental organizations and others working with China, whether in poverty alleviation, environment, education or other forms of increasingly diverse grant-giving. I’d like to reach the general public but that’s too broad a group to target.

The content would be topic driven and deliver the deeper insights and stronger context described at the top of this summary. Under-reported areas include politics and how the government actually works; society and how people’s everyday lives are changing; diplomacy and relations with other Asian neighbors; and commerce in the context of what’s actually happening on the ground, as opposed to the rhetoric.

After brainstorming with fellow Knight Fellows Gabriel Sama and Justin Arenstein, one version of the site might have tabs for domestic coverage (politics, technology, business), external stories (foreign relations, diplomacy, security) and society or people (Fig. 2).

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Or it might be more graphic and presented in layers: data behind news features behind visuals (Fig. 3).

Or it might spread topics over a timeline, so content is accessible, updated and “living,” perhaps with stories in a horizontal film strip, as with many iPad applications (Fig. 4).
Better context is often about story choice. A few examples of developments not explored meaningfully in the mainstream media:

- A Hangzhou company this year offered 18-month long breast-feeding leaves for female workers.
- A Standing Comittee member of the National People's Congress gave a frank interview to the Beijing News on the danger of empty speeches and sycophantic cadres, urging that people speak their minds in order to generate the best new ideas.
- Chinese Internet companies like Taobao and Youlu are pursuing rights and copyright protections online.

Breaking news coverage of the suicides at the Foxconn plant made the iPhone maker look like a sweatshop, a characterization Steve Jobs disputes. A more interesting debate may be whether China has outgrown the “factory towns” that provide not just room and board but also groceries, hospitals, firefighters and swimming pools – and whether government can or will take back responsibility for these services.

Stories said the recent Honda strike was either a significant gain for labor or an unusually tough crackdown with replacement workers. Legal experts such as Stanley Lubman have weighed in online, asking good questions about the function of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. But better still would be more reports from workers, the federation and from the scene. The Wall Street Journal and Reuters interviewed Foxconn founder Terry Gou, but for now, this kind of reporting remains the purview of mainstream newspaper journalists, not bloggers.\(^\text{17}\)

Western media have rightly covered state censorship and the sometimes brutal costs of publishing sensitive information in China, but the resulting picture doesn’t fully describe the freedom of expression people have in their daily lives.  

For further context, note James Fallows’ experience in remote Ningxia province, in contrast to the daily coverage of President Obama’s China visit last year. An interactive site or service that successfully delivers better context and insight on China, with original reporting, would be an incredibly valuable service.

**STAFFING**

Three US- and China-based curators, and six local reporters on the ground in China could produce compelling content, plus a budget for posts from freelancers and guest correspondents. Two reporters would focus on dailies, and four on topics that require more research.

With an office of full-timers, depending on age, experience, amount of editing, ability to travel, etc. this might cost less than $500,000 a year. Part-timers could bring it down to $320,000. Webmasters, freelancers, mobile strategists, conference organizers and marketing, insurance and government fees would be extra. More people could more frequently update stories and cover a wider array of topics, including specialized content for paying customers. Fewer people would mean more reliance on built-in features and partnering with other content providers.

Some focus on major breaking news is needed. But the emphasis would be on the meaning and significance of the most important current events. Like a digest, it would have to choose well. Local staff would need more editing than foreign staff; all would need credentials in order to pursue substantive stories.

It’s important to note that you get what you pay for: ventures that inexpensively hire writers busy with other full-time jobs or projects seem to post stories that appear as though they were written on the sidelines, between other assignments.

In addition to pointing to the best news stories already being published, China File would post data visualizations and original blog posts that are forward-looking or provocative. The WeFeelFine applet shows how bloggers feel – organized by demographics. Can it read Chinese characters and capture the pulse of the Chinese blogosphere? Could you tell where people are angry? Would Chinfographics partner with a news site and produce interactive graphics?

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The Wall Street Journal Real Time blog’s analysis of an important speech on political jargon called for making Chinese officials face the media more often. That could be paired with an essay by a retired official or Chinese PR expert. With good design, multimedia projects and regular features (such as Q&A’s, short opinion pieces and what’s trending on Chinese versions of Twitter), the site could stay current and appealing even with a lean staff.

It would be worth exploring whether there’s an efficient way to ask individual Chinese and American readers what journalistic question they might ask a State Council spokesman or the head of the Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau, or a parent whose child has melamine poisoning. Then have them briefly write up the response they receive (a paragraph or two). Educating people about foreign reporting would go a long way towards transparency and might help build up more trust, in addition to making the process more collaborative.

PARTNERS

The site would partner with think tanks, foundations and other groups who would provide seed funding and access to their research. If the McArthur Foundation is focused on security issues and resource scarcity, they might partner for a series of topic pages on military issues, cyber-security or labor unrest. The Ford Foundation might partner on education reform or philanthropy. Cheng Li at Brookings could debate political succession issues or discuss the impact of the middle class on government regulations.

The think tanks would gain more publicity for their research and would be helping to improve China coverage and public understanding of China. They would benefit from cross-group conferences or events organized by China File to highlight inquiries from top “thought leaders” on China, questions that could be pursued by China File’s reporters. In return, the site would gain readership and possibly additional supporters from the think tanks’ membership lists, as well as content and insights from interviews with their experts.

China File could charge for an analytical or briefing service that would produce background or briefing papers. It could have an events division that would host mini-conferences or timely panel discussions. And it could offer subscribers special features such as a private network of experts or the ability to discuss or debate issues. Fees might be charged for oral briefings or conference calls tailored to particular topics or customer, or for bringing readers together to network around a particular theme. Perhaps the conference function should be out-sourced.

Depending on the subject, a shorter version of a story could be free but subscribers would get a more thorough version – additional reporting, background data and

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20 For payment plans for Honolulu’s Civil Beat and others, see attachment D.
perhaps access to certain sources or experts related to the story. Depending on funding, a special division of bloggers or freelancers might help cover China conferences and events for a fee, as an advertorial function of the site, separate from editorial.

China File would aim to be participatory and to share the expertise of its members. China experts might be convinced to use an applet that shares what’s in their reading files; they might be persuaded to team up in online Q&A’s with Chinese experts in similar areas of research; they might team up to initiate queries that would be of interest to various fields or clients at once.

I’m inspired by a private list-serve of over 1,000 China experts, mostly academics but also journalists, government officials, think tank members, consultants, lawyers and business people who have free-wheeling (and sometimes long-winded) discussions, precisely because it is private. Making any part public would destroy the nature of that discussion. The goal with China File is to produce more informed content that goes beyond daily headlines. Could a members of China File easily post, analyze and annotate notes, Wiki-style, that would be informative and viral?

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS / CHALLENGES

1) Would foundations and think tanks work together to allow their content to be “re-purposed” or are they incentivized to operate solo and preserve their own brands?

2) Would ranking content improve story choice? The interesting Hao Hao Report offers “the best China news and blog posts as chosen by you – 9,735 submissions and counting.” On July 2, 2010, the lead item was a translation from Netease, the Chinese portal and online gaming community, about the installation of more than 8,000 night-vision surveillance cameras all over Urumqi. But sometimes stories about China’s adult shops, circumcision and drunk mainland girls rise to the top of the pile.

3) Appealing to the greatest number of eyeballs seems required from a business point of view. “We’re already in the gutter. What we click on accurately reflects what we’re interested in, no matter how much we think and protest and hope to the contrary,” wrote Henry Blodget, the disgraced former stock analyst and now founder of Business Insider. But is it so crucial for sites that depend on philanthropy? Many China-based reporters tend not to be fans of slideshows like Business Insider’s “15 More Facts About China That Will Blow Your Mind” (and a

**first slideshow**, because they’re the opposite of deeper context and insight. But they attract eyeballs.

4) Perhaps thinking about individual stories – even arranged as topics – is too limiting. “If a page (and a site) become anything, it will be a repository, an archive, a collecting pool in which to gather permalinks and Googlejuice: an article plus links plus streams of comments and updates and tweets and collaboration via tools like Wave,” said author and new media columnist Jeff Jarvis in a blog post last year. “Content will insinuate itself into streams and streams will insinuate themselves back into content.”22

But Stanford professor Clifford Nass argues: “This generation wants to have both depth and breadth, read everything all the time, but they are sacrificing being able to distinguish the irrelevant. By choosing both, you’re choosing neither.”

5) There are currently five to ten major consultancies and many law firms in Beijing targeting foreign firms who do business in China. All are very customer-driven and mainly guide clients in how to make money and stay safely in China. Their content isn’t so much about how to better understand the country, said an experienced researcher who’s worked for two of the consultancies. It’s a more narrow focus: Why the Ministry of Industry and Information is more important than the Ministry of Science and Technology; how to please U.S. headquarters; how to build better government relations with Chinese officials; whether a project can get off the ground.

Customers don’t have the time to understand the complexities that make something difficult, researchers said. Can journalists identify what’s truly valuable to the CEO? I’m reminded of Rebecca Tushnet’s comments, also at the law school conference: “Information doesn’t want to be free. Information and Journalism aren’t the same thing. There’s a difference between value and property,” said Tushnet, a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center. But if people want to play video games instead of reading news, the problem is not going to be solved, she said. “You want people to be consuming stuff they don’t want to consume, that’s the problem.”

6) In 2007, Hong Kong billionaire Richard Li teamed up with Caijing, China’s most famous financial magazine to start Cai Business Indepth (CBID), aiming to provide comprehensive, in-depth China business news along with the latest business technology (in real-time financial data terminals). While they deny going head to head with Bloomberg, they appear to be doing just that.

They have a CEO who is a former Bloomberg executive and Nasdaq managing director, and an executive editor who has reported from 40 countries for the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. But they still have not yet obtained

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credentials for their staff. Meanwhile, Caijing founder Hu Shuli (a 1995 Knight Fellow) has left the magazine along with 140 of her top staff. Partnering with someone like Hu would highlight the work of China’s best journalists and might help with the credential problem.

7) Finally, William Moss, the PR executive who owns the Imagethief blog, wonders whether it’s necessary to have a separate, curated China site, when one can discover interesting stories through a combination of two or three “high-value” blogs and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. It’s a good question. China File would succeed by having several voices or curators recommending quality content, and have to balance clean design with enough choice.

“Finding four or five voices I trust to refer quality content is how I manage the fire hose,” Moss said. “One of the challenges you’ll face is catering to people who have wildly divergent interests, even within a China context.”

OTHER POSSIBLE ANGLES

1) Trying to focus mostly on investigative journalism is also a resources challenge. Would a Spot.Us and ProPublica model work for foreign? There are huge differences between the two. Partnering Western and Chinese investigative journalists works informally on the ground, but publicizing those relationships would attract unnecessary attention. Would wealthy Chinese readers support it?

The China Media Project at Hong Kong University is doing great work training and promoting investigative journalists and would be a useful partner. They are also working on how to better translate and spread existing online China news, including a very interesting Chinese Media Map (still in development) that will allow readers to click on local Chinese media and read those sites using Google language tools.

2) Targeting middle-class or wealthy Chinese with trend stories is an altogether different topic, but not to be over-looked when thinking about revenue models. If they’re interested in the MBA information that John is selling, perhaps they might also be interested in a built-in social network or membership with elite American readers interested in their consumer choices, environmental concerns or investment questions.

3) On business intelligence, due diligence and political risk assessment, many firms provide it: the Economist Intelligence Unit, Stratfor, Medley Global Advisors (now owned by Financial Times parent Pearson), the Eurasia Group and others. With senior experts and high pay walls, the work seems top notch. But two critics who have spoken at length with one of these firms and are familiar with their analysis

say this content could also be much improved with more on-the-ground reporting. If successful companies penny pinch at this level, on the one thing that makes content stand out, what does this say about the true value of in-depth reporting?

4) Those who monitor events in conflict zones also worry about the shrinking numbers of experienced foreign correspondents based in a country. The International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch have teamed up to start FromTheGround.net, a sort of wire service for conflict zones and areas of ethnic tension. They hope to have credible NGO workers and former journalists writing from more than 60 countries, if funding can be found. Currently, a China story by Human Rights Watch is considered a press release, but with fewer foreign bureaus, all kinds of models are being considered.

“Media outlets are desperate to not hire, to do everything as cheaply as they can,” said Andrew Stroehlein, with ICG in Brussels. “They send a 20 year-old fresh out of university who wants to go to Nairobi for the first time. Nobody’s on the ground who stays for a long time, who understands the context and can tell the difference between what is really a news story and someone doing the ‘same old, same old.’ You saw it in Kenya after the elections ... there are so many examples.”

The cost of the lack of this coverage is steep, aid workers said. “When I refer to Sri Lanka as the worst humanitarian disaster in Asia – and the most dangerous place to be an aid worker or a journalist – people generally have no idea what I’m talking about,” said Kevin Hartigan, regional director for South and Southeast Asia with Catholic Relief Services, which has also helped with HIV, AIDS and earthquake relief in China. “That’s a place where the absence of reporting undoubtedly lowered the political cost of atrocities and the blocking of humanitarian relief.”

(In China, credentialed journalists need permission to enter Tibet, but not usually Xinjiang. Reporters and translators are routinely subject to physical and electronic surveillance, especially during sensitive periods. Local officials often ignore written directives from Beijing to be more open to the media).

5) A digest of high quality news from small-circulation sources, sort of like an Utne Reader for China, might work, Hartigan and others said. An intellectual short-cut, but with in-depth information not easily available elsewhere.

For example, curated translations of the Tibet Daily, the Lhasa Evening News, the publications of the People’s Armed Police in Sichuan or Xinjiang and other journals would likely find a paying audience (how big, it’s difficult to say). Translators and journalists who can sift for policy and appointment changes, variations in slogans and political speeches and practical information about construction, education, religion and law would not be as cheap as those who cannot distinguish news.

From 1986 until 1996, the U.S. government’s Foreign Broadcast intelligence Service monitored, translated and published nearly 2,000 translations from the openly
available Tibet Radio and Tibet Daily. Since then, its successor, World News Connection, has published practically nothing from either, experts said.

One longtime foreign editor for a major regional newspaper that cut its seven foreign correspondents, warned against shortcuts. Foreign has always been a “loss-leader,” a public service that never stood on its own legs, he said. “When resources are scarce, the first place to cut is foreign. Fewer correspondents mean more people parachuting into stories they know nothing about. Witness the tentative coverage of first few days of Honduras crisis. We don’t need 50 inches to cover every story, but we can’t write them all in 25 inches either. Good foreign coverage requires good human resources, money, space and experience.”

Now more than ever, it’s important to help readers sort through the torrents of information being produced, said David Hoffman, former Assistant Managing Editor for Foreign at the Washington Post. “I don’t think the basic goals are going away: story-telling, reporting, investigating, analyzing, synthesizing, discovering, uncovering. All this remains in demand and will remain so,” Hoffman said. “However, it will be done by many people, and many of them will work for themselves or for outlets that are not big newspapers or news-gathering organizations. The line between carefully-vetted reporting and hot air opinionating is no longer going to be so clear. The reader will have to make some decisions, and some judgments. There may be bloggers worth reading and others who are not.”

ATTACHMENT A – EXAMPLES: QUALITY FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/05/AR2005050501563.html

A Killing Commanded by Tradition: Afghan Adultery Case Reflects Challenge of Extending Modern Law to Tribal Lands.
By N.C. Aizenman, Washington Post Foreign Service
Friday, May 6, 2005

http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/6916

Genocide’s Child: Her Son, Her Sorrow (part one).
By Dele Olojede, Foreign Editor, Newsday.
May 2, 2004 (Part 1)
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/18/AR2006021801389.html
**The Great Firewall of China | A Letter's Journey in Cyberspace**
The Click That Broke a Government’s Grip.
By Philip P. Pan, Washington Post Foreign Service
Sunday, February 19, 2006

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/12/21/091221fa_fact_osnos
**LETTER FROM CHINA**
Green Giant: Beijing’s crash program for clean energy.
By Evan Osnos, New Yorker
Dec. 21, 2009

**RULE BY LAW: A Judge Tests China’s Courts, Making History**
By JIM YARDLEY, New York Times
Published: November 28, 2005

http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/8804
In Anbar, U.S.-Allied Tribal Chiefs Feel Deep Sense of Abandonment
By Anthony Shadid, Washington Post Foreign Service
Saturday, October 3, 2009

http://chinaelectionsblog.net/?p=3618
Editorial: Just How Deep is the Water in the Shanxi Vaccine Case?
By Wang Keqin
The China Economic Times
March 17, 2010
Full text in Chinese here: http://chinaelectionsblog.net/?p=2949
Repercussions here: http://chinaelectionsblog.net/?p=5166

**ATTACHMENT B – CHINA URL’s**

**Translation sites:**
East South West North blog http://www.zonaeuropa.com/weblog.htm
China Digital Times http://chinadigitaltimes.net
Danwei http://www.danwei.org/
HKU’s China Media Project http://cmp.hku.hk/
China Hush www.chinahush.com
Local Chinese Voices (in English):
Global Voices  [http://globalvoicesonline.org/-/world/east-asia/china/]

Expat blogs/sites:
China Beat  [http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=1010]
Shanghaiist  [http://shanghaiist.com/]
Shanghai Scrap:  [http://shanghaiscrap.com/]
China Law Blog  [http://www.chinalawblog.com/]
HaoHaoReport  [http://www.haohaoreport.com/]
The China Beat  [http://www.thechinabeat.org/]
Imagethief  [http://imagethief.com/]
China Divide  [http://chinadivide.com/]

Other Topics:
NRDC's climate blog  [www.greenlaw.org.cn/enblog/]
ChinaDialogue:  [http://www.chinadialogue.net/]
RConversation  [http://rconversation.blogs.com/]
Sinocism  [http://www.sinocism.com/]
Joshua Rosenzweig  [http://www.siweiluozi.net/]

Financial sites:
WSJ’s Real Time blog  [http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/]
FT's China Confidential  [http://www.ftchinaconfidential.com/]
(requires subscription)
Michael Pettis' blog, China Financial Markets  [http://mpettis.com/]
Gady Epstein  [www.forbes.com/gady-epstein]
DigiCha  http://digicha.com
China Stakes  http://www.chinastakes.com/
China Geeks  http://chinageeks.org/
China Geeks Archives:  http://www.sun-zoo.com/chinageeks/
Silicon Hutong  http://siliconhutong.com
Silicon Dragon  http://www.rebeccafannin.com/

**Chinese bloggers (in Chinese - partial list):**
Investigative journalist

Ran Yunfei:  http://blog.sina.com.cn/wutixinshi
independent blog:  http://ranyunfei.com/

Hong Huang:  http://blog.sina.com.cn/honghuang
Publisher, editor  (110-163 million page views)

Pan Shiyi:  http://blog.sina.com.cn/panshiyi
Developer  (62 million page views)

Han Han:  http://blog.sina.com.cn/twocold
Racecar driver  (377 million page views)

**English sites of state-controlled Chinese media:** very different from Chinese versions and sometimes represent what officials want foreigners to read or think they are publishing in Chinese.

Global Times:  http://china.globaltimes.cn/index.html
Economic Observer:  http://www.eeo.com.cn/ens/
Xinhua (official state wire)  http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/world.htm

Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily)  http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/
RSS of their China news:  feed://english.peopledaily.com.cn/rss/China.xml
RSS of their World feed:  feed://english.peopledaily.com.cn/rss/World.xml
Increasingly open mainland media include Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo), Freezing Point (now closed) and Caijing (under Hu Shuli). Others also cite the 21st Century Business Herald, published in Guangzhou.

Caijing (former editor: Hu Shuli)  http://english.caijing.com.cn/
New Century Weekly (Hu’s latest)  http://english.caijing.com/

Other:
The Carter Center’s China Elections  http://chinaelectionsblog.net/
Brookings (China topic page)  http://www.brookings.edu/topics/china.aspx
Brookings-Tsinghua Ctr (Chinese):  http://www.brookings-tsinghua.cn/
Yale Global Online  http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/  (search for China)
Jamestown Foundation  http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/
Shanghai street stories:  http://shanghaistreetstories.wordpress.com/
China’s Scientific & Academic Integrity Watch  http://fangzhouzi-xys.blogspot.com/

ATTACHMENT C - REDUCED FOREIGN COVERAGE

1) Sept. 27, 2001 article by David Shaw, Los Angeles Times: A 1998 study by UC San Diego found that only 2% of total newspaper coverage focused on international news, a drop from 10% in 1983. Reposted here:  http://www.commondreams.org/headlines01/0927-03.htm

2) February 2009 article in Johns Hopkins Magazine about the International Reporting Project, a fellowship supported by The Johns Hopkins University: “A downturn in international journalism, reflected in a 25 percent decline in the number of American newspaper reporters based in foreign countries since the turn of the millennium, led the IRP to shift gears.”  http://www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/0209web/world.html


4) In an Open Society Instiute survey of media in Central and Eastern Europe, content has become shallower, more entertainment-centered, increasingly
isolationist, more prone to political and business influences and lacking in investigative bite:

(The study of 18 post-socialist countries hit by the crisis -- Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine -- showed media had lost 30 to 60% of their income; an exodus of foreign investors; new owners with non-transparent ownership structures; salary freezes; layoffs; more celebrity news)

5) Scotti Williston writing in Transnational Broadcasting Studies (TBS), published by the Adham Center for Television Journalism, American University in Cairo (Spring/Summer 2001): “When I was CBS Cairo bureau chief in the late 1970s and early 80s, CBS had 14 major foreign bureaus, 10 mini foreign bureaus, and stringers in 44 countries around the world. Now, CBS and the other networks have just a handful of foreign bureaus. Paris is gone, Frankfurt is gone, Cairo, Rome, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Beirut, Cyprus, all gone. They do not do foreign news. The feeling now at the networks is that you can fly someone in, get information from the local newspaper and wire services, and the presence of the foreign correspondent speaking in front of the camera will suffice.”

6) Dec/Jan 2008 issue of AJR on “the seven ABC News journalists who took on new posts around the world this fall (and) may be set to change the definition of ‘foreign correspondent.’ … Although (ABC President David) Westin wouldn’t reveal budget details, maintaining a traditional broadcast bureau overseas — including salaries and support such as office space, communications, travel, camera crews, secretaries, fixers, family housing and school tuition for correspondents’ dependent children — can easily total $500,000 per year,” says John Maxwell Hamilton, dean of Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication.

7) "Covering The World," in the same issue of AJR: AP is an anomaly with 243 bureaus in 97 countries. "Back home, foreign bureaus continue to fall like dominoes. The Boston Globe closed the last of its three international offices in Berlin, Bogotá and Jerusalem earlier this year. The Baltimore Sun plans to shut down South Africa and Russia by the end of 2007 and already has left China. For TV networks, the modus operandi long has been to parachute in for short stints to report high impact stories (although ABC recently opened seven one-person foreign outposts). A February 2007 story in Global Journalist, a publication of the Vienna-based International Press Institute, declared, ‘The era of the foreign bureau is close to over. Will the foreign correspondent be the next to go?’ ”

8) International Crisis Group says the decline has been happening for years and that even traditional foreign correspondents now have to blog the minute they land. See Andrew Stroehlein’s quotes above.
In his year-end presentation, Knight Fellow Andrew Finlayson concluded that advertising (as we know it) is dead and the **semantic web** will soon remove the need for traditional newsrooms that fail to provide far better interpretation and analysis.

New trends include using algorithms to generate story ideas. Associated Content and Demand Media are **generating advertising revenue** by assigning freelancers to automated, mathematically-generated assignments based on Internet searches: these ideas are more valuable, from an advertising perspective, than topics thought up by human reporters.24

Google has **obtained** a patent to mine search data and identify under-covered or “inadequate content” online in order to generate story ideas.25

Forbes recently announced a new online strategy: thousands of unpaid or poorly paid contributors, while editors increasingly become curators of talent.26

Salon recently laid off some of their regular staff and launched Open Salon, a collection of mostly low-paid or unpaid bloggers. I’m sympathetic to Paul Carr’s **reaction** in TechCrunch, but speakers such as Salon’s Richard Gingras have repeatedly stressed the importance of cutting costs and increasing customer engagement.

Much of the work with data visualization, interactive graphics, augmented reality and social data and recommendation has been happening at blogs, start-ups and computer science labs (see “Speakeasy” and “Cherry Blossoms,” two MIT projects that could also have come out of an innovative newsroom: [http://edgyproduct.org/pm/pmwiki.php?n=GroupDesc.GroupDesc](http://edgyproduct.org/pm/pmwiki.php?n=GroupDesc.GroupDesc)).

Mainstream newsrooms, while experimenting, do not yet seem to have fully grasped the full potential of mobile and the social uses of data; focused more on a story than a topic, they often fail to update valuable data or graphics, even after publishing an exhaustive investigative project.

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