



“Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

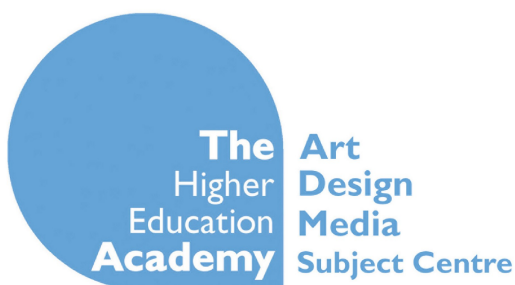
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Understanding the Complexity of Journalistic Practices: the Case of Xinhua News Agency

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The major theme of this research (2003-2006) is to conceptualize the change of *Xinhua* over the last two-and-a-half decades in the context of globalization. However, no existing English and Chinese literature on Chinese media and news agencies provides adequate knowledge of *Xinhua*. Instead, both fields have fallen into numerous controversies. Many scholars in the two fields have turned to the globalization controversy for a conceptual framework, which itself has been confused by various versions of the global/local polarization.

Taking the major debates on globalization, Chinese media and news agencies into account, we can see that Chinese media remain the opposite case of the global/local binary in the sense that global media players are still not able to be localized freely within the territory of China, whilst Chinese local media cannot be globalized easily either. Yet, the situation of news agencies provides rather a mixed picture. On the one hand, the ‘crisis’ of some state-based news agencies seems to echo the claim of neo-globalization theorists about the decline of nation-states in the process of globalization. On the other hand, the decline of some international players, such as *UPI* in the US and former *TASS* in the former USSR, alongside the absence of real global players suggests that the development of news agencies contradicts the claim. Even if the Chinese national context and news agencies are seen as exceptional, there are more contradictory examples to be derived from various national contexts and media institutions. If these examples are analyzed by either of the two opposing approaches proposed in the existing theoretical binaries, as discussed earlier, the likely outcome would be that more contractions will be found and more bipolar frameworks will be created accordingly. However, neither approach framed within existing binaries is adequate to explain the complexity of the contemporary world, which is changing constantly. The complexity of the reality has reflection on but is not limited to ‘middle grounds’ between two poles, variations and mixtures of the two poles.

In order to understand the complexity of the reality, it is also important to know why the commonly adopted way of thinking fails or constrains the search for a more accurate understanding of the complex world. This study endeavors for such an understanding, starting by examining the limitations of the common way of discussing globalization, Chinese media and news agencies.

Limitations of the Common Way of Thinking

If all the major controversies in the three fields are put together, we can find that they actually have a commonality, sharing a common way of thinking. The global/local nexus, state/market binary, international/national divide, and wholesaler/retailer distinction – all these theoretical frameworks are dealt in a similar way, polarizing two extreme positions for generating a yes or no answer. Apart from those listed above, there are more polarizations which can be seen and read quite often: capitalism/communism, West/East, North/South, developed countries/developing countries, democracy/dictatorship, rationality/irrationality, and optimism/negativism. This polarization approach has been taken for granted by Western academia, and only this way of thinking is considered as ‘logical’, which is often used as a synonym for ‘rational’ (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002; Hall, 1992). This common way of thinking, is based on and guided by the ‘Crisp Logic’ (see table 1) (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 180). Here the term ‘logic’ refers not only to ‘an important part in the way people think’, but also to the unexamined assumptions and underlying thoughts, which frame the way of reasoning (Ford and Ford, 1994: 756-785). The notion ‘crisp’ means ‘a yes or no, black or white, 0 or 1 type of answer’ (Chorafas, 1994: 64). Crisp logic ‘has the binary code True/False, Yes/No, Right/Wrong, and this is a persistent theme in Western thinking’ (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 186).

Crisp Logic is also called ‘two-valued logic’, the propositions of which ‘take one of two unique values, true or false’ (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 40). It adopts the ‘either/or’ approach and uses bipolar outcomes (Ibid). The logic makes a judgment: A or not-A (Kosko, 1994: 23).

There are at least two explanations about the origin of Crisp Logic. The first view suggests that the ‘bivalence’ of the logic comes from the ‘faith in the black and the white’, which ‘reaches back in the West to at least the ancient Greeks’ (Kosko, 1994: 6). It originated from Aristotle’s ‘law’, which ‘defined what was philosophically correct for over two thousand years’ (Ibid). As it has been addressed:

Aristotle took time off from training his pupil Alexander the Great to write down what he felt were the black-and-white laws of logic, laws that scientists and mathematicians still use to describe and discuss the gray universe (Kosko, 1994: 6).

Subsequently, Aristotle's black-and-white 'came down to one law: A OR not-A', which means that 'Either this or not this. The sky is blue or not blue. It can't be both blue and not blue. It can't be A and not-A' (Kosko, 1994: 6). However, this binary logic 'has always faced doubt' as it 'has always led to its own critical response' (Ibid).

Another view on the origin of Crisp Logic points out that it is rooted in the Cartesian-Newtonian synthesis, 'which has dominated Western thinking for more than two millennia' (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 180). The Cartesian-Newtonian synthesis is mainly nurtured by the 'Enlightenment Project', which includes ten ideas:

1. the primacy of reason and rationality;
2. empiricism;
3. scientific knowledge based upon experimental method;
4. universalism;
5. progress;
6. individualism;
7. toleration;
8. freedom;
9. uniformity of human nature;
10. secularism (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 35-6; Hamilton, 1992: 21-22)

Among the ten ideas, the first six are considered to form the core of the Cartesian-Newtonian synthesis, which is considered as a scientific method characterized by its rationality, atomism, reductionism, quantification, determinism and prediction (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 36). This method is one of the major achievements in natural science, and is still used as a centerpiece in many current scientific works, such as those in evolutionary theory (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 36). However, this scientific method has its limitations, which have been examined in application to sociology of work, business and administration management, financial market analysis, psychotherapy and other fields of social science (Chorafas, 1994; Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002; Grint, 1995 and 1998; Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974).

Some anthropologists who are in favor of Crisp Logic suggest that ‘the principle of binary opposites is a central feature of all classifying systems to a wide variety of cultural phenomena’ (Bocock, 1992: 246). In Levi-Strauss’s (1977) ‘Structural Anthropology’, the application of Crisp Logic is combined with structuralist method for analyzing symbolic structure (Bocock, 1992: 246). The symbolic structure examines how different elements were classified and arranged, and how the principle of ‘binary opposition’ was implemented (Ibid). Crisp Logic’s anthropology ‘regards social life as a system of which all the aspects are organically connected’ (Levi-Strauss, 1977: 365). Crisp Logic encourages anthropologists along with social psychologists, jurists, economists and political scientists to create models with ‘the underlying motive of discovering a *form* that is common to the various manifestations of social life’ (Ibid).

Likewise, Crisp Logic applies to modern sociology, notably the dichotomy ‘the West and the Rest’ (Hall, 1992: 275-320). For some sociologists, the application of such ‘binary opposition’ is merely for the convenience of conceptualizing ‘all linguistic and symbolic systems’, although they are aware of the complexity of the real world, where ‘differences often shade imperceptibly into each other’ (Hall, 1992: 279). They attempt to use the sharp polarization towards each other to make the complexity of the world seemingly more manageable. Take the discourse ‘the West and the Rest’ for example:

The West and the Rest became two sides of a coin. What each now is, and what the terms we use to describe them mean, depend on the relations, which were established between them long ago. The so-called uniqueness of the West was, in part, produced by Europe’s contact and self-comparison with other, non-western, societies (the Rest), very different in their histories, ecologies, patterns of development and cultures from the European model (Hall, 1992: 278).

As a result, the divide ‘the West and the Rest’ became a ‘very western-centred or Eurocentric’, but remains ‘a very common and influential discourse, helping to shape public perceptions and attitudes down to the present’ (Hall, 1992: 279).

Crisp Logic has its limitations to understand change. In the early days, this logic attempted to ignore the change in reality in order to make philosophically or theoretically correct statements (Kosko, 1994). Kosko has pointed out:

We know things change (...) Yet in much of our science, math, logic, and culture have assumed a world of blacks and whites that does not change. Every statement is true or false. Every molecule in the cosmos belongs to your finger or not. Every law, statute, and club rule applied to you or not. (Kosko, 1994: 5)

Crisp Logic tends to draw attention only to desirable change or so-called ‘revolutionary change’. According to this logic, the change follows the only linear path: from one pole to another (normally hoping for ‘better’). The change is expected to be revolutionary and rapid.

For achieving desirable change, the logic believes in rational design, such as business strategies for enhancing competitive advantage (Porter, 1990). If the outcome of the change does not seem to be desirable, it would be considered as a failure of the rational design and might even lead to a denial of any change. This kind of thinking of the reality and change not only has resulted in the oversimplification of the complex reality which is in constant change, but also has revealed unavoidable absurdities, that ‘draw lines in the sand’ (McNeill and Freiberger, 1993: 12). Take the distinction between a novel and a novella for example:

A novel might have 90 pages or more, a novella less than 90. By this standard, a 91-page work would be a novel, an 89-page on a novella. Thus, if printers reset the novella in larger type, it becomes a novel. (McNeill and Freiberger, 1993: 12)

Crisp Logic encourages people to ‘put black-and-white labels’ on things, which are changing all the time and ‘flow smoothly to nonthings’. The logic tends to ignore that ‘the labels will pass from accurate to inaccurate as the things change’ (Kosko, 1994: 5). For instance, ‘A rose is a rose is a non-rose when its molecules change’ (Ibid). Clearly, Crisp Logic shows its absurdities (Ibid). The methodology based on this logic, as criticized, ‘in effect went from one extreme to the other, and left a vast middle ground untouched. In this ground there may be many variables’ (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 179, based on Weaver’s (1948) ideas). Theoretical frameworks based on this logic inevitably lead to polarizations which are aiming not to reflect and understand the complexity of reality, but to simplify it.

Still, these limitations cannot deny the contributions of the Cartesian-Newtonian synthesis in natural science and that of ‘Enlightenment Project’ in the development of Western society. This thesis does not deny its contributions. Instead, the thesis aims to explore how its limitations have constrained Western understanding of the wider world and its change.

Seeking Other Ways of Thinking

In order to understand the complexity of reality rather than simplify it, it seems necessary to seek other ways of thinking. There might be a potential danger to fall into the similar paradox of Crisp Logic if only one alternative way is found to be more useful than Crisp Logic to explain the complex reality. However, if this alternative way of thinking endeavors to break through the limitations of Crisp Logic that frames the diversified world into two extreme models, then it is worth considering. Moreover, if this alternative way of thinking embraces rather than merely opposing Crisp Logic, then its application is even more valuable. In addition, any alternative way of thinking should not be taken as the only choice. Rather, it should be considered as continuing efforts endorsed for pursuing more accurate understandings of the complex world. Of course, abandoning Crisp Logic and any other ways of thinking can also be considered as an alternative way of thinking. However, it is too contentious for this thesis to test all the possible choices.

There are at least two logics which merit all the considerations listed above, endeavoring to understand the complexity of the change taking places in different contexts. They are Fuzzy Logic (see table 2) and Four-valued logic (see table 3) (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002).

Table1: Crisp Logic

A	Not-A
True	False
False	True

Table2: Fuzzy Logic

A	Not-A
True	False
False	True
True	True

Table3: Four-valued logic

A	Not-A
True	False
False	True
True	True
False	False

Both Fuzzy Logic and Four-valued logic have provided good ways of understanding of complexity of reality. The two poles highlighted by Crisp Logic are embraced by Fuzzy Logic and Four-valued logic as well. The latter two logics treat the two poles promoted by Crisp Logic as extreme cases.

Four-value logic ‘has rarely been examined in Western thinking’, but there are examples which can be found in the works of Nagarjuna, who is ‘the second-century Indian philosopher prominent in the Madhyamika School’ (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 190). Nagarjuna developed his ontology on the basis of this approach, which ‘has the potential to enrich the debate on postmodernism’ (Ibid). Surely, this logic deserves further examination, particularly for those who are interested in postmodernism. However, this thesis does not aim to discuss postmodernism and its origin. In order to make this thesis less contentious but more coherent to the major theme, the author will test Fuzzy Logic only. However, this does not mean that Fuzzy Logic is the only choice.

Fuzzy Logic is not a logic that is fuzzy, but a logic that ‘describes and tames fuzziness’ (McNeill and Freiburger, 1993: 12). Fuzziness is related to the statements, such as indeterminate, uncertain and grey (Kosko, 1994: 7). Some scholars suggest that ‘Fuzziness is greyness’ (Kosko, 1994: 4). This logic has a scientific root in ‘*multivalence*’ (Kosko, 1994: 19; Italics in original). The notion ‘multivalence’ was derived from ‘*three-valued logic* with statements, such as true, false, or indeterminate. The three-valued logic is based on Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics, which suggests that ‘if you measure some things precisely, you cannot measure other things as precisely’ (Kosko, 1994: 19). This principle opposes bivalence generated by two-valued logic (i.e. Crisp Logic), which promotes ‘true or false’, ‘A or not-A’ (Kosko, 1994: 19-23). A Polish logician Jan Lukasiewicz further developed three-valued logic by chopping ‘the middle ‘indeterminate’ ground into multiple pieces and came up with many-valued or multivalued logic’ (Kosko, 1994: 19). In the 1960s, Lotfi Zadeh applied Lukasiewicz’s multivalued logic to ‘sets or groups of objects’, labeled by Zadeh as ‘Fuzzy Sets’ (Zadeh, 1965, quoted by Kosko, 1994: 19). According to Kosko (1994), Fuzzy Logic accepts both A *and* not-A. Here both A and not-A are fuzzy sets (Kosko, 1994).

When A is a fuzzy set and x is a relevant object, the proposition ‘x is a member of A’ is not necessarily either true or false, as required by two-valued logic, but it might be true only to the degree to which x is actually a member of A (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 187).

This logic measures the ‘degree of membership in fuzzy sets’ (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 187). The degree of membership can be measured ‘by numbers in the closed unit interval’ – 0 and 1 (Ibid). Here 0 and 1 represent the extreme values. In a given fuzzy set, there are 0s and 1s, and no clear boundaries between 0s and 1s (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002; Kosko, 1994).

Fuzzy Logic gives ‘a meaningful representation of vague concepts expressed in natural language’, such as a set of middle-aged people, expensive houses, dangerous dogs, expensive profits, endangered species and modest profits (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 187). This logic is also widely adopted in applied science, particularly in Japan and South Korea for producing air conditioners, car engines and other electronic appliances (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002; Kosko, 1994; McNeill and Freiberger, 1993). Fuzzy Logic has also attracted increasing attention in management and finance, providing ‘a powerful representation of measurement’ of uncertainties and complexities of change (Chorafas, 1994; Darwin, Johnson and McAuley).

Fuzzy view sees change as a natural thing: ‘Everything is in flux. Everything flows... Things flow smoothly to nonthings’ (Kosko, 1994: 5). Change according to Fuzzy Logic is ‘*a matter of degree*’ (Kosko, 1994: 18; Italics in original). Fuzzy Logic suggests that all things ‘come on a sliding scale’, which in most cases hardly distinguishes members from nonmembers, things from nonthings (McNeill and Freiberger, 1993: 12). Fuzzy thinking of change can be expressed in the ‘inexact oval’:

The adjective ‘Fuzzy’ meant that the figure is to some degree a circle and to some degree not a circle, but more a circle than not. (Kosko, 1994: 46)

In practice, this inexact oval also means:

(...) we cannot draw a hard line between circle things and noncircle things. They overlap. In that region circles shade into noncircles. The fuzzy view sees an ambiguity or vagueness between things and nonthings, have and have not, circle and noncircle, A AND not-A. (Kosko, 1994: 46)

According to Fuzzy Logic, examining change is looking at the natural development process of the thing or subject. Fuzzy Logic views change as not linear. Here the notion of change is not limited to the form of decrease or increase, worsening or improving in comparison only with the previous

forms. Instead, Fuzzy Logic suggests a system's thinking of change (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002). This means that the change of a thing should be examined in a 'complex adaptive system' (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002: 182). This system is 'open and negentropic' (Ibid). The system is open internally and externally, which means that 'interchanges among its components may result in significant changes in the nature of the components themselves with important consequences for the system as a whole' (Ibid). It can be seen that the fuzzy view's change includes but is not limited to the natural flow of a thing. It also includes how a thing interacts with a set of things and a set of non-things within the system, which interacts with its internal and external environments simultaneously. Both the thing and the system are changing simultaneously. The interactions within the complex adaptive system are not necessarily well organized and can also be performed both in order and chaos. They can take various forms: competition, collaboration, negotiation, consultation, contradiction, opposition, overlapping at various degrees, mixture, coexistence, creating new things, conglomeration and many other forms. According to Fuzzy Logic, only the past is certain, but the present and future are uncertain (Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002). Theoretical approaches based on Fuzzy Logic aim to understand complexity of reality, which is changing all the time, rather than polarizing or simplifying it.

Provisional Application to the Case of Xinhua

For this study, the author has adopted Fuzzy Logic and its way of thinking of the change to *Xinhua*. This means that the case of *Xinhua* is examined not merely by looking at the linear shifts from one pole to another as a number of theoretical polarizations on globalization, Chinese media and news agencies have suggested. The change in the case of *Xinhua* is also not limited to the comparison between its more recent past with its earlier past. It also takes account of how *Xinhua* interacted with a set of political forces, a set of Chinese media organizations and a set of news agencies in an environment, which is open *and* close, internally *and* externally. The change also implies how a set of *Xinhua* journalists responded to the changing organizational environment which is being structured both in order *and* chaos. The change also applies to the struggles of *Xinhua* for survival in an increasingly competitive multileveled market, including negotiations with a set of forces. It also considers *Xinhua*'s gradual adaptation to multiple function and multiple financing sources, operating in different markets, notably local, national and international markets. Last but not least, application of Fuzzy Logic to the case of *Xinhua* means that the author accepts that the future of

Xinhua is uncertain. The aim of this study is to provide an understanding of the complex reality, not to polarize it.

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