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ARTICLE

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# The logic of new media in international affairs

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### Abstract

Proponents of new technologies argue that new media forms could have a dramatic impact on the way in which citizens gain political information, including important information regarding international affairs. This article argues that foreign policy is constrained by public opinion, which is in turn affected by media portrayals of other nations. Moreover, the impact of a particular media form is mediated by the 'logics' of the format. The article proposes a conceptual scheme and criterion for determining the impact of media format in presenting international issues; it also proposes that the logic of new media, in contrast to the logic of traditional media, brings greater information, but less knowledge and critical awareness of foreign affairs.

### Key words

international relations • logic of new media • political discourse

With the advent of electronic communications, notably television, the role of diplomats in international affairs changed dramatically, as the official representatives of governments began to respond less to their own judgements or their government's directives and more to the unfolding stories on television. As one analyst remarked, 'once CNN is on the story, the media drumbeat begins, public opinion is engaged, and a diplomat's options recede' (Neumann, undated). If public opinion does have an impact on foreign relations, then media play an important, if indirect, role in

enabling or constraining policy options by helping to shape public opinion (Combs, 1993; Kusnitz, 1984; Malek, 1997; Malek and Kavoori, 2000; Nimmo and Combs, 1990; Powers, 1999; Taylor, 1997).

Likewise, in an era of new media, a significant number of popular, governmental and academic commentators have argued that the deficiencies of traditional media in providing political information would be overcome, particularly because of the ways in which new information technologies would empower the polity. In this article, I will attempt to assess the impact of new media on international relations, by arguing that the relative impact of a media format on international discourse can be understood by reference to the *logics* of media, by which I mean the organizing principle of information, and will propose three corresponding criteria for analysing media impact:

- (1) the ability of the format to create a narrative framework;
- (2) the delivery of relevant and timely, or 'epistemologically significant' information; and
- (3) the extent to which the media promotes a deliberative perspective on an issue.

I will illustrate this by a brief historical overview of the role that various media, including print, broadcast, film and new media technologies, play in creating a framework of discourse by reference to one of the thorniest issues in international politics, US/Chinese relations.

This particular case study has salience because the relationship between the two nations has been an important one for the better part of a century. Since the mid-19th century, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been a focus of Western attention, from missionaries to scholars, traders to politicians, and it often serves as both a setting and a plot device for various media artifacts. Also, the PRC's government has given full attention to mobilizing the Internet for informational purposes, and thus it provides a 'best case' scenario to contrast the ability of new media with that of old media to present meaningful data for international relations.

The rest of this article will consist of three parts. In the first, I will articulate a conceptual framework by examining the logics of media format. In the second, I will examine how various media formats, and their logics, have affected US perceptions of the PRC. In the third section, I will discuss how the logic of the database, which underlies new media, presents 'China' to an international audience, and will articulate some of the critical ways in which new media are likely to affect public understanding of critical international issues. I will at times use 'the internet' and 'new media' interchangeably, although I acknowledge there are various ways of thinking about the differences between these two terms.

## THE LOGICS OF MEDIA FORMAT

Although many assume that the media frame politics, analysis of the role of media in politics typically collapses all formats, such as commercials, print and broadcast journalism, or motion pictures and television, into a general argument about the 'media' in politics, thus losing discriminatory power in understanding the role of various media formats. If, as Castells argues, 'the logic, and organization, of electronic media frame and structure politics' (1997: 312), then it becomes imperative to unpack the dimensions of that logic. Although Castells hints at what that logic might be, he does not detail the ways in which one format differs from another.

Media ecologists, at least since McLuhan and Ong, have argued that various media formats differ in multiple ways, including the nature of the media/user interaction, content, production, audience use and reaction (McLuhan, 1964; Ong, 1982; Postman, 1985). There is, then, a need for a more discriminatory enunciation of the ways in which these media formats affect the public imagination of international relations. In what follows, I will borrow from the conceptual frameworks of media ecology to identify three key logics of media format, in order to demonstrate what such a theory might look like.

Manovich proposes that there are two culturally significant forms of cultural expression that can be discerned in comparing old media and new media, the narrative and the database (2000: 218). Whereas narrative is exemplified through novels, film and news journalism, the logic of new media is the database. To Manovich's two, I will add a third, the logic of the conversation. Within this conceptual scheme, it is possible to articulate the power of media format in political discourse.

The logic of the narrative is chronological, and relies upon a cause and effect trajectory (Manovich, 2001: 225). It is the narrative by which we make sense of the world, and our place in it (Fisher, 1987). The logic of the database, in contrast, is hierarchical, ordered and list-like. The database organizes and presents data according to a preset value structure and algorithm. The logic of the conversation is deliberative and reflective, both expressive and adaptive.

Thus, one criterion for understanding media impact is the ability of a format to develop a contextual framework, or an overarching narrative pattern that creates a sociopolitical reality for citizens, or a mythic frame which often encompasses powerful stereotypes and expectations of other nations (Kluver, 1997). Narrative media formats, such as television dramas or motion pictures, can shape political consciousness by portraying a world of lived experience and shaping the mood of a mediated experience. Other narrative media forms, such as novels or biographies, can have analogous impact, although these tend to be muted by the fact that there are fewer audience members who encounter the media in the same way at the same

time. An example might be the impact of Pearl Buck's novel, *The Good Earth* (1931), and its later stage and film adaptations, in shaping American attitudes towards China during the 1930s, thereby creating a political milieu in which American intervention in the Asian theatre of the Second World War was possible.

This emphasis on narrative within news media, focusing on scandals, horseraces, and such like, does perhaps undermine reasoned analysis of issues (Castells, 1997: 333–342). Print news outlets duplicating this narrative framework of the electronic media are responding not just to the tastes of readers, but the logic, organization and leadership of electronic media formats.

A second criterion is the degree to which meaningful and relevant information is presented to the public, exemplifying the logic of the database. Unlike narrative, the database has no chronological beginning or end, but rather assembles discrete bits of information according to a preset pattern, and then presents it to a viewer according to a certain command sequence. It is possible for new media, in formats such as computer games, or user-generated sequencing possible through new interactive formats, to have an appearance of narrative structure. But, as Manovich argues, 'regardless of whether new media objects present themselves as linear narratives, interactive narratives, databases, or something else, underneath, on the level of material organization, they are all databases' (2001: 228). Thus, new media first and foremost embody the logic of the database, rather than the narrative.

Traditional newsgathering systems have to some extent embodied this logic, but this is somewhat deceptive. The ideological rationale of the free press system is predicated upon the ability of news organizations to gather, sort, process and present information according to some hierarchy of value. Typically, we conceive of newspapers as a form of database for meaningful information regarding foreign events, and thus forget their essentially narrative nature. Newspapers report on issues of importance at the immediate moment, and stories are typically presented in dramatic fashion. Thus, news coverage of a political coup or a natural disaster will provide immediate information regarding loss of life, complete with dramatic photos, but will provide little in the way of helping citizens to understand the ways of life, cultures, or the values and attitudes of people within the affected nation. Although print media embodies a potential for a high degree of specificity in the information provided, the details are always selected and presented based on narrative quality.

However, new media provide an almost unlimited amount of information that can be tremendously useful when it is appropriately sorted and filtered. The ability to gather news and even video images from around the world has accelerated at an astounding rate, and all of the resources of the world's

newsgathering organizations, governmental agencies and academics are online. Thus, from any (wired) point on the planet, it is possible to obtain an almost inexhaustible amount of information on issues of relevance to foreign affairs. In fact, internet-savvy persons now have the ability to gather an unparalleled amount of background information for useful context in interpreting the events of the day.

If the logic of the database is to provide hierarchically organized information, the limitation is that the information is usually stripped of the narrative context which gives it meaning. As information has increased, meaning has disappeared. Graham (1999) argues that there is a critical difference between digital information, of which there seems to be no end, and 'epistemologically significant' information, which is required for knowledge and critical analysis of policy. The more limited set of knowledge required for informed discussion is literally overwhelmed by a flood of information.

Although it provides a valuable service, a database is not inherently democratizing. Because the data must be arranged, the power of arrangement, and thus the power of authority, typically rests with the database operator or designer. Since it is difficult to distinguish between noise and truly useful information, the user relies on the database logic to present the information that is needed. Thus, those who post the information, and can establish the order of presentation, actually gain power and authority. Thus, editors, journalists and academics, rather than suffering the 'misfortunes' of equalization, are rather elevated to new heights of authority in interpreting what is 'news' and what is relevant.

Perhaps the more dangerous trend for civic discourse, however, is that the logic of the database enables individuals to immerse themselves completely in only that information in which they have an immediate personal interest, rather than in larger affairs and issues confronting the polity. Customizable news feeds, such as that provided by the internet portal Yahoo!, allow an individual to completely control the news content to which she is exposed, thus precluding information that is outside one's predetermined frame of reference. Thus, as Shapiro states, 'ignorance and narrow-mindedness, then, are hidden dangers of the control revolution' (1999: 107).

The first two criteria illustrate the logic of the narrative and the database, but the last has to do with a third logic, that of interaction and reflection, or the logic of the conversation. A conversational logic implies a progressive movement towards understanding as interlocutors share opinions and insights, and most importantly, learn from one another. An ideal media format would enable individuals to listen, interpret and then subsequently modify an argument. Newspaper editorials are illustrative of arguments offered, which are then accepted, rejected or modified by readers, who have

a limited opportunity to engage the feedback loop so as to contribute further to understanding. Electronic media embody little conversational logic, as it is difficult to 'argue' with a movie, television show or radio broadcast. In contrast, media such as newspaper editorials typically have more well formulated arguments that entail a chain of reasoning and some form of meaningful evidence.

Typically, print media invite more reflective and deliberative attitudes within an audience. Jacques Ellul (1985) goes so far as to say that the differences between hearing and seeing (or text versus image) is foundational to critical thinking. Text-based information invites critical thinking and argument, while image-based information merely overwhelms and leaves the audience with little recourse to refine or dispute arguments. Of course, a well-made movie invites contemplation, but rarely on the specific details about policy proposals. A movie might indeed make one fear or love a foreign nation, but it will rarely invite such nuanced deliberation on important international affairs issues such as technology transfer, the balance of trade or bilateral arms talks.

Although print media are essentially narrative, there is a slight potential for newspapers to provide the critical feedback loop by which deliberation happens. But even with the relative weakness of this feedback loop, editorials and stories in a newspaper invite disagreement and reflection. The situation is much worse with electronic media such as television or radio, as not only is there no realistic mechanism for audience members to publicly disagree with the vision presented, but the nature of the presentation makes it difficult to critically reflect on the accuracy or validity of the overall appeal, which operates at a different cognitive level.

Much discussion of new media technologies has focused attention on the ability of the internet as a means for dialogue and serious deliberation of political issues, to embody the logic of conversation. Becker and Slaton (2000) argue that information technologies increase the ability for citizens to actively deliberate on issues of tremendous political importance. This in fact has been a theme underlying much scholarly analysis of emerging technologies. An influential study by the Rand Corporation argued that, because of the inherent reciprocity of email, the internet is a 'democratizing' medium (Kedzie, 1997). By being able to instantaneously respond to any message to the same audience, individuals had far greater power to influence policy. The widening of the 'feedback loop' thus gives new media a democratizing bias over other media formats.

But the extent to which new media truly embody this logic is disputable. While acknowledging that new media bring a certain 'directness' to political discourse, Applbaum (1999) nevertheless argues that it does not inherently increase deliberateness,

a reflective process of honestly giving and listening to reasons and arguments among persons who are open to changing their views about facts, interest and values for the right reasons, and who have the capacity and motivation to imaginatively occupy the perspectives of others. (1999: 27)

His theory is supported by Wilhelm (1999), who argues that political forums on the world wide web seldom invite reasoned and conscientious dialogue, but rather are used to vent personal opinions with little consideration of counter-arguments.

To summarize my argument thus far, foreign policy options are constrained by prevailing political attitudes, political culture, assumptions and expectations, which in turn are shaped by the logics of the prevailing media. The logic of the narrative, the logic of the database, and the logic of the conversation each are present in greater or lesser extent within media formats: print journalism exemplifies the logic of the narrative, with a secondary logic of reflective conversation, while broadcast media and film embody a narrative logic. New media exemplify to a greater extent the logic of the database.

In an ideal situation, citizens would be presented with a compelling and fair narrative or contextual framework, as well as being given the relevant information about foreign policy options. With this background, participation in a reflective dialogue with other citizens would then create a situation in which foreign policy discussions would be democratic and ultimately reflect the broad deliberative consensus of the people. I will illustrate the value of this conceptual format by an historical summary of the way in which traditional media have influenced US citizens' perceptions of the PRC.

## **MEDIA PORTRAYALS AND PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS OF CHINA**

During the 18th and early 19th century, most citizens were informed about China solely by two sources: business interests and diplomats at the national political level, and missionaries at the local level, through sermons, letters and journals (Jesperson, 1996: 1). Reed argues that because of a missionary impetus inherent in American Christianity, it was '[at church that] most Americans knowing anything at all about the subject first learned about East Asia' (1983: 8). The contradictory impulses of God and mammon resulted, however, in a united vision of China. All participants, whether merchants, missionaries or governmental representatives, agreed that China needed Western technology, Western medicine, and Western education, and thus American political culture took on a 'benevolent paternalism' towards China (Mosher, 1990; Reed, 1983).

By the 1930s, the mass media had emerged as the interface between public opinion and diplomacy (Taylor, 1997: 66), but narrative logic

continued to be the greatest significant influence on US perceptions of China in the 20th century, as the public learned of it through journalists and writers, the most prominent among them including Pearl Buck, Agnes Smedley and Edgar Snow. Isaacs (1958) argues that Buck's novel *The Good Earth* had by far the greatest influence on shaping American attitudes towards China, even *creating* the Chinese, a 'wonderfully attractive people', for the vast majority of Americans (p. 155). Left-wing writers such as Edgar Snow, in *Red Star over China* (1938), attempted to portray a China that indeed was under the weight of poverty and oppression, but would soon emerge under the leadership of the emerging Chinese Communist Party.

But, the most influential media on American consciousness of China until after the Second World War was the creation of Henry Luce, who was born and raised in China by missionary parents. Luce's media empire was instrumental in shaping the dominant US perceptions of China, and galvanizing US commitment to China after the Japanese invasion (Neils, 1990). The narrative that Luce presented balanced the competing vision of the more left-wing writers, and ultimately, prevailed over the novels and books of Snow and others. These narratives had a profound impact on American thinking in establishing an image of a needy nation, desperately in need of Western intervention in the form of religion, medicine, education, technology and political guidance.

With the advent of visual media, including television and movies, US perceptions of China began to be shaped more by that visual media, which remained primarily narrative in essence, but which lost much of the more reflective nature of print-based media. Films set prior to the war reflected a vision of China as a nation beset with poverty and victimized by Japanese aggression. One example is the 1943 Alan Ladd film *China*, which depicted the transformation of Ladd from a calculating merchant into a devoted fighter for China after he sees the cruelty inflicted by the Japanese.

Motion picture treatments after the Second World War further contributed to a one-dimensional portrait of China, such as John Wayne's *Blood Alley* (1955) which portrayed the entire population of a village attempting to escape from China. This narrative vision had little to counter it, either in popular culture or journalism. Moreover, print journalism was constrained by the fact that real data was difficult to obtain, as journalists were usually based outside of China or they faced government control of sources within China.

In the 1980s, the Cold War political paradigm that had developed began to change, but still retained its essential elements of conflict between Western democracy and monolithic, dictatorial regimes. The events of the late 1980s, including the rise of Gorbachev and the Chinese reforms, seemed to signal that communism was falling to the better natures of humans. Deng Xiaoping made a successful trip to the US where media



images reinforced this image, as he was portrayed on US television at a rodeo in Houston, wearing a white cowboy hat. Although there was abundant evidence that China's government remained totalitarian and the nation in the shackles of ideology, the narrative logic of the nation's transformation tended to prevail, largely through the image-driven media.

In 1989, of course, this expectation was crushed by the events in Tiananmen Square. The news coverage provides a rare instance in which broadcast news coverage attained the narrative power of movies. The daily coverage from Beijing and the subsequent military suppression of the movement created a serialized dramatic narrative that had powerful resonance within the US political consciousness. American portrayals of the events coincided perfectly with the prevailing narrative framework in the late 1980s that had been played out repeatedly in Eastern Europe, of a 'people's revolution', in which the students, workers and intellectuals collectively shrugged off the yoke of communism. American journalists effused over the students' dramatic protests, and viewers in the US were treated to nightly pictures of students parading through the square waving banners with quotations from Patrick Henry and Abraham Lincoln. In fact, the media portrayals of Tiananmen Square were so inherently and visually dramatic that during the overnight period of the military crackdown (3–4 June), China's image shifted dramatically from a nation emerging from communism, to one again under the domination of doctrinaire, communist henchmen.

After this event, American media consistently portrayed China as a dangerous rival. Mike Chinoy, CNN's primary journalist covering the Tiananmen movement, argues that the coverage emanating from this single episode retains an extraordinary power over American consciousness:

The images of a lone man stopping a line of tanks by standing in the road, the Goddess of Democracy statue and others broadcast on CNN and other television networks retain an extraordinary power. They remain among the most memorable symbols of resistance to tyranny this century. (Chinoy, 1999)

Successive American administrations found it almost impossible to negotiate the politically critical need to engage China, while at the same time appeasing American public opinion. This dramatic framework effectively coloured all subsequent China-related policy issues, including charges of illegal campaign contributions, alleged Chinese spying on American nuclear facilities and China's conflict with the US over UN involvement in the Balkans. In short, the Tiananmen drama was so vivid, it prevented any meaningful diplomatic progress in relations between the two nations primarily because of popular sentiment against China.

In the 1990s, the most widely-known media portrayals of China included several movies that presented negative images, including *Red Corner* (1997),

*Kundun* (1997), *China Cry* (1990), and *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), all movies which fed into the predominant view of China as a repressive police state, with the only major film with a positive image of China being Disney's *Mulan* (1998). Again, although there was abundant economic, political, and cultural evidence that China was indeed a much more dynamic nation (the database logic), prevailing perceptions were driven by the narrative.

## NEW MEDIA AND US PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA

If the narrative logic of journalism and electronic media has shaped the past, what is the potential impact of the logics of the database and the conversation, which new media typify? In an era of new communication technologies, particularly the internet, is it likely that traditional media forms, including literary and visual ones, will lose their power over framing public debate in this critically important public discussion?

Much public discussion of the role of the internet remains dominated by cheerleaders and hyperbole, with little critical appraisal of how it actually is used and how the logic of the medium both encourages and inhibits serious discussion of foreign affairs. For example, Nicholas Negroponte declared that, thanks to the internet, children in the future 'are not going to know what nationalism is' (Negroponte, 1997). Another high-tech prophet, Michael Dertouzos, argued that digital communications will bring 'computer-aided peace', which 'may help stave off future flare-ups of ethnic hatred and national break-ups'. The reasoning behind his argument is that 'any new channel of communication among the people and organizations of this world is likely to contribute to increased understanding hence greater peace' (1997: 218). Thus, the logic of the conversation enabled by new media will prevail over the narrative logic, which distinguishes between 'us' and 'them'. What is troubling is that this naive reasoning, and the presumption that improved communications technologies will reduce misunderstandings and avert political conflict, has an inordinate and perhaps unjustified role in interpreting the impact of communications media on government policymakers, as well as average citizens.

In fact, new communication technologies do have a vast potential to break the monopoly that governments and media organizations have traditionally held over foreign policy debates. By selectively presenting various sides to a debate, governments and media outlets can minimize debate, maximize it or sideline it (Page, 1996). Even more importantly, the emerging media give individuals access to vast amounts of information, bypassing traditional media outlets. However, the logic of new media does not always act in the way that is expected. In particular, the logic of the database offers little hope of creating greater understanding of international issues among the populace. To illustrate this, I will examine some of the

most popular functions of new media in order to demonstrate the logic of the database at work.

Manovich (2001) argues that all new media design has as its purpose either efficient access to information or as a mechanism of psychological immersion in an imaginary universe. New media as a source of information, both news and other types of information, is the application that is most hyped by politicians and web advocates, but it is perhaps the 'psychological immersion', or a means of creating a new virtual life, that often proves the more compelling for users.

As an information source, the internet is displacing newspapers and television broadcasts as the primary source of news for many citizens. According to a survey in 2000 by the Pew Research Center for the People and Press, 18 percent of people who get news online at least once a week use other sources less often, which is up from 11 percent in 1998 (Pew Research Center, 2000). Moreover, 22 percent of internet users get news online daily, and most surf the world wide web specifically for this purpose. These numbers are likely to continue to rise. As online news sources grow in importance, they are likely to have an inordinate impact on public understanding of foreign affairs.

The internet has several key advantages over newspapers and broadcast news. The first is timeliness. Breaking news is a central feature of most major news outlets, and events from around the world can be reported, commented upon and archived electronically within a matter of seconds. Secondly, online media outlets are not constrained by space issues. Stories can be as long as the editor deems that they ought to be, to keep the interest of the readers. Moreover, background or context stories can be part of the web page design, allowing curious readers access to vast archives of information. Thus, many of the physical and economic constraints that normally enter into editorial decisions are lessened by the nature of the media, thus bypassing the filtering processes of traditional media outlets, in which only a marginal fraction of available information is passed on to citizens (Taylor, 1997: 68). The new media, then, transform an essentially narrative news industry into a much more database-like information source, while also allowing multiple channels of feedback and dialogue.

However, other characteristics of online media inhibit greater understanding of sensitive and controversial issues, particularly in the complexities of foreign relations. For example, with broadcast news, editorial control is in the hands of the news producers, but the nature of the format means that stories must be presented in a linear fashion, and it is only possible to present one story at a time. Producers must negotiate a difficult balance between keeping viewers' interests as well as presenting 'important' stories. Through strategic production decisions such as the use of visual images, timing and the careful creation of teasers, broadcasters seek to

maintain the attention of the audience through stories in which viewers might not have an interest. Even if they have no prior interest in a topic, viewers find themselves partly educated, partly entertained and partly informed about the issue.

With print media, readers have more discretion over input than they do with broadcast, because nothing forces them to read certain articles. However, because of the physical process of turning a page, viewers often serendipitously encounter articles that they would otherwise pass over because of page placement or any other number of factors. Thus, a regular newspaper reader is likely to encounter articles on various topics that will at least partially contribute to their understanding of political issues.

However, with online news sources readers have more control than ever over what they read. Although they might see headlines, they are unlikely to read a story which does not immediately appeal to their interests. Typical news sites usually have a major story, accompanied by photos and several related articles, with a sidebar giving access to other categories, such as international, political, business or sports news. Although international news is often featured prominently, there is nothing inherent in the medium to force attention to these news items, other than interesting text or attractive graphics. In fact, the ability to completely customize news content minimizes any potential disruption to a preconceived view of the world (Shapiro, 1999).

A second critical function of the internet as an information tool is a more pure version of the database logic, as a source of specialized and general information on a myriad of topics. The internet places online an unimaginable number of previously inaccessible documents, images and information through amateur and professional sites and institutional resources such as the Library of Congress. To stay with our subject, the internet provides literally millions of sites that concern China.

NorthernLight.com, for example, catalogued 1,286,470 sites with the search term 'China' in mid-February 2002, with 148,000 sites using the narrow term 'People's Republic of China'. Google had catalogued over 20 million web pages using 'China', and over 790,000 using the official title of the nation. In spite of these huge numbers, it seems that no search engine actually indexes more than 16 percent of the world wide web (Introna and Nissenbaum, 2000), meaning that there could conceivably be five times more sites on China than even the most comprehensive search engine lists.

When a user types in a search term, the search engine returns pages of results, with far more information than an individual can reasonably be expected to ferret through. In fact, most people won't go through more than three pages of returns (Introna and Nissenbaum, 2000), so accessibility to the documents listed is effectively constrained by the searcher's patience. The various search engines each have unique algorithms that dictate how

documents are organized. This innate bias in search engines is complicated further by political and economic factors behind the web search engines. Because of their ability to ‘trick’ some of the algorithms, use metatags, or even buy a higher placement, corporations tend to dominate rankings in many of these search engines.

The conversational logic that seems to be a part of a search engine is really just an illusion. In spite of the incredible sophistication of the technologies, search engines lack the ability to discern what a user really needs and then provide it, but as a user refines a search query, the database reorganizes the information. Thus, a single individual could conceivably place highly biased information in the most visible places in the web, thus altering the sorts of information that might be available to individuals. Hence, for those who already have a fairly sophisticated understanding of foreign policy issues, the web will reveal even more useful information. The overwhelming amount of information, rather than increasing the ability of any given individual to find different perspectives, might actually be an impediment as individuals tend to rely on the placement within a search engine, which is perhaps more anti-democratic than traditional news sources. The logic of the database is that information is accessible to the one who knows what information to look for, not to provide critical information for the one who is not looking for it.

Thus, access to the internet does not inherently bring about better information, and what information is available does not constitute knowledge or wisdom. Graham (1999) argues that the semantic slipperiness of the term ‘information’, confusing digital information with what he calls ‘epistemologically significant’ information, causes a misapprehension of the nature of the information provided by new media. An overwhelming amount of bits and bytes available through an electronic network does not provide much help in discerning whether a specific foreign policy proposal is valid.

There is another facet of new media, though, that bears relevance to our discussion, and that is as a means of psychological immersion, or even entertainment. Downloadable music, multiple-user domains and games, chat rooms and online movies are but one example of the ways in which the internet has become a serious competitor to other forms of entertainment. Within the near future, as bandwidth increases and allows television, movies and other forms of digital media, there is greater potential for viewing all kinds of information that might pique interest in foreign issues, such as foreign films. What is the most likely impact of this aspect of new media upon Western understanding of China? Particularly, do the new media possess a conversational logic that is necessary for deliberative reflection of key issues?

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the Internet for scholars of online community are the chatrooms, in which people from very different areas can engage in real-time textual or audio dialogue on issues of common interest. Although the chatrooms are normally organized around topics of interest, such as politics, sports or sex, they often have various conversations going on at the same time. Multiple channels of communication allow for wide-ranging, even multiple conversations happening at the same time and same virtual place. These chatrooms are often marketed as avenues to learn more about other places, meet new friends and generally increase understanding. One cross-national website advertises its services in this way:

Internet chat is indeed a wonderful development, providing a convenient forum for people of vastly different experiences to meet, learn from and exchange views and ideas with each other. In the process, hopefully, chatters all around the world will understand each other better; ideas will cross-fertilise [sic]; and both minds and lives will be enriched.(Dragonsurf, undated)

This expectation of chat as a mechanism for increasing understanding seems to permeate all discussion of chat.

News sites, such as the *New York Times* and CNN, often include forums for response to various news items. During April 2001, these chatrooms exploded with posts about the mid-air collision between US and Chinese planes, demonstrating their utility as a mechanism for political discussion. CNN's web forum on China, for example, went from a daily average of 20 postings to close to 4000 daily posts during the week after the accident (Kluver, 2001). Web forums around the world demonstrated the same trend, including not only US websites, but also Chinese, such as the *People's Daily* forum.

But in spite of the great potential for building bridges across difference, the logic of the database overwhelms any sense of conversation that might appear on new media. A chatroom or forum function is really a collection of discrete bits of information that are presented to a participant, with no reference to her needs, values or interests. If 20 messages a day is reasonable to read and think about, 4000 is overwhelming. But the database does not discriminate between the meaningful arguments, the trivial jokes, the insults, the digressions, and the mispostings. Each trivial flame message takes no more time to download than a reasoned, insightful response to a previous query. The non-motivated reader, then, finds that rather than wading through all of the trivial responses, she will forego the conversation altogether.

Moreover, the chatrooms probably do more to cloister people around narrow interest areas than they do to integrate them. In fact, the internet is not at its best when used as a mass medium, but rather as something in between traditional mass media and interpersonal communication. Perhaps it

is best understood as a point-to-person medium, with chat serving as a person-to-person medium. Moreover, since chatrooms are by their very nature focused around interest groups, hobbies or lifestyles, they will not often generate interest from people without those interests, except in the cases of sex, for example, where people often use the web for sexual experimentation.

The promise offered by forums and chatrooms, to enable participants to interact around meaningful topics and learn from one another, is rarely accomplished, as Wilhelm (1999) demonstrates. The other entertainment functions of the web also seem to offer little promise of overcoming the inherent logic of the database. It would certainly be possible to put any film or novel online, and thus attempt to establish a narrative logic within new media. However, in doing so, one is merely using one media format to deliver another, not changing the nature of the format itself. The logic of the database, which is the essence of new media, cannot by itself correct the deficiencies of traditional media.

The earlier revolution in diplomatic practice caused by the advent of electronic media was not because electronic media brought a different logic to how people gained information, but rather that it enacted the logic of the narrative better than the newspaper. Seeing a city in flames or a child dying from malnutrition is far more compelling than reading about it. But the logic of new media does not gather an audience and tell a story the way that a newspaper or broadcast news does; rather, it provides specialized information to specialized and fragmented audiences. By ceding control of the narrative to users, the internet paradoxically undermines its usefulness in creating an informed and critical citizenry. This is not to say that for informed and motivated users, the internet will not be beneficial, even revolutionary. But, actual practice shows that as a device to create an informed and critical citizenry where there was none before, it fails.

## CONCLUSIONS

My argument has been that traditional media have had a profound impact upon shaping Western perceptions of China, and that the logic of new media are unlikely to dramatically improve public discourse regarding international relations. Whether this is true also of domestic policy issues is a separate question, as citizens of a nation typically have more interest in domestic politics, and so the internet might actually improve the quality of public discourse on issues of domestic policy, although even this assumption has not been documented. Hachigian (2001) demonstrates how the internet forced government-controlled media within China to be more transparent and responsive, and there are multiple examples of new media enabling more focused and effective political action in places such as Indonesia and the Philippines.

It is necessary to note that there are examples where new media do indeed bring international consciousness into focus. For example, Castells (1997) argues that the success of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas was due to the fact that the leaders created the first *informational* guerilla movement, using information technologies to create an international constituency. In this instance, the internet successfully communicated a narrative that transcended political, cultural and linguistic borders, and demonstrated the power of new media to draw international attention. However, this is an example of a motivated political agency reaching out to a motivated audience of politically aware individuals, many of whom then communicated the narrative through traditional media. In the case of a largely unconcerned audience, or a less astute political organization, the same is unlikely to occur.

New media are limited in the ability to create an overarching 'grand narrative' in the same way that Luce's mass media empire did (Taylor, 2000), as among the larger population, the events in Chiapas are still largely unknown and irrelevant. It is doubtless true that some issues have a heightened international prominence because of a web presence, such as China's Falungong movement. But the logic of the database does not systematically highlight all, or even most, instances of governmental oppression, encroaching poverty or war, or resistance movements.

For motivated participants, the database logic of new media can have an overwhelming political impact. There are literally hundreds of instances in which new media empowered motivated constituencies and enabled them to achieve political force. Likewise, for an interested observer, the logics of the database and the conversation are very valuable, and new media clearly enhance this. However, my argument has been more modest: for influencing public opinion generally, new media do not demonstrate any inherent superiority over traditional media forms.

Moreover, the internet at this point reflects the sensibilities and values of its primary users, who are overwhelmingly English-speaking, educated and above average socioeconomic status. The looming digital divide means that at least in the near future, the internet will continue to reflect the political and consumeristic values of the online world, primarily North America, Europe and some parts of Asia. To learn something about a far away place, one must look for it on the internet. Although a lay person might generate a spontaneous interest in international relations, it is actually more likely that disinterested surfers will encounter *less* information than they would by reading through a major newspaper or watching a television broadcast. Of course, this must be said with qualification. No doubt many, if not most, web surfers spend many hours drifting aimlessly on the information superhighway.



That said, however, a vibrant public discussion about public affairs does not occur when people have only accidental knowledge about topics. Meaningful debate about public policy and foreign policy occurs when citizens have comprehensive understandings of the variety of issues involved, and although the internet provides the capacity to provide this, it seems no more likely to do so than traditional media.

The purpose of this article has been twofold: to demonstrate the logic of media forms in establishing a political culture in which issues of foreign policy are worked out; and to explore the ability of the internet in its current form to contribute to public deliberation of international relations. In the critical realm of US–Chinese relations, scholars who are concerned about political discourse must look beyond the premature promises of those who argue that emerging technologies will necessarily lessen political and international conflict. Moreover, the utopian dreams that new media will bring about a ‘computer-mediated peace’ need to be critically analysed, so that future hopes are based not just on technological fantasy, but upon more accurate understandings of the technologies which mediate political, social and cultural discourse.

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