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Lee, Chin-Chuan

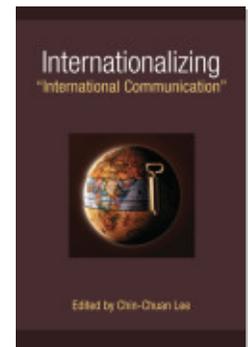Published by University of Michigan Press

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Theorizing Media Production as a Quasi-Autonomous Field

A Reassessment of China News Studies

Judy Polumbaum

A quarter century ago, Charles Berger and Steven Chaffee sought to delineate the contours of their preferred academic domain with the publication of the *Handbook of Communication Science* (Berger & Chaffee, 1987c). In an introductory chapter, they identified the coalescence of studies concerning communication into dedicated academic departments, scholarly journals, and schools of research as evidence that a formerly diffuse field was "acquiring the trappings of a discipline" (Berger & Chaffee, 1987a, p. 15). They contrasted this situation with Wilbur Schramm's observation, another quarter century earlier, that communication fell considerably short of disciplinary status, being rather "an academic crossroad where many have passed, but few have tarried" (Schramm, 1963, p. 2). Yet this increasingly self-conscious and institutionalized realm of knowledge remained immature, according to Berger and Chaffee. It was time, they proposed, to attempt to impose some theoretical coherence on the terrain.

Pairing the term "communication" with the term "science" was their admittedly limiting way of drawing boundaries that excluded some forms of research while valorizing others. What distinguishes science from non-science, they explained, with obvious allusion to the natural science model, is the development of "testable theories" in pursuit of generalizable ex-

planations. Their definition explicitly rejected research conducted in the cause of media criticism or activism, as well as the study of "individual communication events" for their own sake rather than in furtherance of larger theoretical principles (Berger & Chaffee, 1987a, p. 17). The fundamental goals of science, they wrote, included "explanation, . . . prediction and control"—meaning control not of social outcomes, but in a narrow methodological sense of having a handle on the conditions under study; any "positive" or "negative" implications, while of legitimate concern for anyone as citizens, were beyond the ken of the scientist (Berger & Chaffee, 1987b, p. 100).

The *Handbook* should not be undervalued; its synthesizing essays offer both historical markers and enduring insights, and some of the entries are indisputably masterful. The custodians of the volume are unquestionably giants in the field—Steve Chaffee was already a legend when he died prematurely. The collection is particularly lucid about levels of analysis, and examines a wide range of communication modes and contexts whose exploration continues to give vigor to the field. Nevertheless, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the editors' circumscription of the field looks oddly stingy and self-defeating.

"Positivism" has become the popular epithet to describe adoption of the natural science model for use in the social sciences, but this oversimplifies the issue—not to mention needlessly promoting academic antagonisms. Theoretical assumptions, guiding questions, and methodological choices will always constrain research results; however, assuming transparent collection, data should be useful to anyone caring to examine it, and subject to reconsideration even in analyses that may have nothing to do with the original research intent. Doubts about the idealized scientific method exist even among the natural sciences, but that does not preclude advocates of different approaches from making mutual use of each other's empirical findings.

In the field of communication, however, it could be argued that the natural science model constrains the scope of research in ways that are ever more outmoded. From the rigidly scientific perspective, for instance, what we have long called "international" or "comparative" communication research becomes merely a source of sites of replication. The *Handbook*'s reduction of international communication to a single essay, relegated to the end, on "Cross-cultural Comparisons" (Gudykunst, 1987) is perhaps symptomatic of this rejection of particularistic study. The meager attention also highlights an inhibiting lack of curiosity about the world. By now,

even among scholars of disparate persuasions, it is widely recognized that diversity and commonality are equally important constituents of human existence. This does not obviate the quest for transportable explanations, which emerge in part from identifying differences that make a difference. But variation may matter in other ways entirely.

At bottom, this chapter is a plea for generosity in the construction of what "counts" as progress in the study of communication, and for a correspondingly more expansive view of international communication. In such a spirit, I outline an approach that seems promising for advancing the international study of media production with reference to the body of research I know best, concerning the production of news in contemporary China. Drawing on a considerable accumulation of studies of Chinese journalism and news media in the post-Mao reform period, I try to integrate some of the most recent empirical findings into a coherent analysis in a manner that respects both ambitions of generalizability and the integrity of the particular.

As with other contributions to this volume, my discussion takes inspiration from the movement to "de-Westernize" media studies (Curran & Park, 2000), including the criticism of research conventions that deem Western/U.S. contexts the norm or template against which findings from other settings are measured. Of course, the critique does not dictate spurning everything that originates with Western thinkers. Along with fellow contributors, I find in Western social theory much useful guidance for international communication research, and in Western research practice many helpful exemplars. I am especially grateful to Rodney Benson for his explication, here and elsewhere (e.g., 1999, 2006), of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "fields of cultural production," and to C.C. Lee for his argument for grounded, culturally nuanced studies that dignify rather than elide diversity; indeed, this chapter is intended as complement (as well as compliment) to theirs.

Fields as Arenas for Action

If my discussion begins as a rejoinder to conventional definitions and goals of social science as represented by Berger and Chafee, these reservations are by no means original. The fine tradition in this vein reached a kind of fervor in the early 1970s with the turn toward interpretive sociology, reflexive anthropology, and other alternatives to the mainstream canon, and continues in what arguably has become a more pluralistic, if less combat-

ive, academic climate today. The communication literature likewise is full of caveats arising from the "ferment in the field" of the 1970s, the transcontinental influence of cultural studies and, more recently, the interest in alternatives to Anglo-American constructions of media and journalism. Yet the fact that, even today, these trends typically are framed as critiques is indicative of how entrenched the natural sciences model remains.

In his best-known treatise, Giddens (1984) provides one of the strongest rejections of the natural science template, arguing for dispensing with a search for stable laws and even generalizations in the human realm. For him, social theory should refer to a mode of analysis that revolves around "conceptions of human being and human doing, social reproduction and social transformation" (p. xx). His substitute for the aim of establishing and validating generalizations is what he calls structuration, or analysis that hinges on the interactions of human agency and social structure. This is theory in the sense of conceptual assumptions about how the world works, rather than propositions to be tested. It is theory as starting point rather than outcome. It begs the question of why or whether we should call it theory at all, as opposed to, say, approach or framework or guiding premise. By whatever name, Giddens's interest in how social actors assert autonomy of action within the mechanics of power, as well as his emphasis on empirical study in particular spheres of meaning and action, are of direct relevance to those of us who study media production.

Bourdieu (1993) developed the idea of fields of production with reference to social spaces within which cultural producers operate. A field is a "space of possibles" (p. 176) where specialized agents and institutions interact to preserve or transform the established order. And while external configurations exert influence upon fields, these spaces in themselves allow for degrees of autonomy. Externally, economic or political forces, historical events or technological developments may contribute to expanding or circumscribing the elastic range of possibilities; while within a field, actors operating from various positions with variably distributed interests and resources interact in ways that may fortify established possibilities, promote emerging innovations, or yield new creations.

It seems to me that Giddens and Bourdieu have, if different languages, similar understandings of social actors at the individual level. Giddens sees "lay" people, meaning non-scholars who are the subjects as opposed to the conductors of research, as skilled and knowledgeable about their own behavior; Bourdieu sees the specialized producers he studies as strategic and purposive. Their formulations rest on sophisticated interpretations of

agency that consider conscious action as well as the unconscious, intent as well as unintended consequences.

Fields are oriented around particular stakes and a structured set of positions; occupants holding those positions have varying resources and inclinations, and engage in strategic struggles to define and redefine the stakes. Fields have varying degrees of autonomy, a field's boundaries are fluid, and any field is interdependent with other fields (Warde, 2004). Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" resonates with Giddens's focus on "routine" as integral to day-to-day practices that go into the reproduction of social systems. They share the conviction that social systems structure possibilities for action, while action in turn creates and conditions social structures.

As Hesmondhalgh observes (2006, p. 216), Bourdieu provides an alternative to "naïve notions of creative freedom and innovation," and the same may be said for Giddens. Structuration is based on the conviction that the dynamics of human affairs entails give and take across levels of activity, from the workings of the individual mind to the most macroscopic of societal forces; and analysis of fields of production calls attention to articulation among the different levels as well as among different fields. As Ryfe notes (2006, p. 207, citing Benson), journalism is unique in playing a mediating role with respect to other social fields; for this reason, he argues, the field of news production is especially subject to influences from contiguous fields.

These ideas provide a fruitful framework for studying media production that is rooted in the particular, an approach consistent with the anthropological imperative of attending to context. To Geertz (1973), culture *is* context; his admonition to focus the microscope ever more closely on the phenomena under scrutiny underscores the importance of precision in deciphering meaning within an enveloping culture. The objective is not causal attribution, but rather grounded explanation. This mode of inquiry lends itself to pursuit of questions of "how" and "why" with respect to particular constellations of actors within particular institutional configurations at particular confluences of space and time—suggesting the interdisciplinary importance of geography, history, and biography. It also invites study of patterns of change within bounded yet permeable social systems—the attempt to track how and why things that used to work that way came to work this way, and what changed within and among the moving parts to reconfigure outcomes and consequences.

Such a framework has helpful implications for research questions and study design (e.g., Kunelius & Ruusunoksa, 2008) and is no less useful as a

guide for re-analysis of completed studies. The recognition of degrees of autonomy within fields, with attention to enabling mechanisms working at multiple levels and in multiple directions, calls for examination of how social spaces for doing media work may expand or contract; and much of the empirical research on Chinese media production from recent years casts light on this very issue.

Surveying the Field of Chinese News

The once exceedingly small window on mass media in the People's Republic of China has expanded steadily with increased scholarly access from the 1980s on, and the literature continues to grow in volume, ambition, and sophistication (see Polumbaum, 2010). This essay revisits empirical studies of newswork in China published in English during the first, quite productive, decade of this century.

Regardless of stated theoretical approaches or objectives, most authors of this scholarship share an interest in social change and generally agree on its potential sources: state, market, media occupations, and audience influences. Methodologies vary, with field studies yielding the most productive findings about journalists and their practices, while content analysis continues to be used (not always wisely, sometimes well) as a basis for inference about practice. Fieldwork consistently identifies negotiation, improvisation, and even guile as important dynamics of the news production process. Scholars differ, however, on which actors exercise agency in ways that make a difference, and which benefit from the results, in both short and long terms. Traversing this literature with these discrepancies in mind helps identify the range of the possible and provides markers for further research.

Among the work that explicitly considers interactions of structure and agency, Pan (2000) views journalists as "entrepreneurial actors" who avail themselves of tensions between political controls and market freedoms to improvise and innovate in a manner that is reconfiguring institutional space differentially in different regions. Akhavan-Majid (2004) suggests that official and unofficial agents have collaborative interests in state policy initiatives that have enabled non-state agents to engage in "creative renegotiation and expansion," contributing to mass media reform. She identifies the replacement of ideology by pragmatism, the shift in authorities' operational emphasis from "ideological supervision" to "entrepreneurial collaboration," and common interests in media profitability in an increasingly commercial system as beneficial to these diverse categories of actors.

Hu (2003) discerns an intertwining of political and economic forces in the restructuring of media, with the establishment of media conglomerates fortifying the alliance between sources of capital and sources of political power. Lee, He, and Huang (2006, 2007) have gone the furthest in documenting the complicity of state and media agents and institutions, finding accommodation at many levels that ultimately serves both political and economic power.

Tilt and Xiao (2010), in a content analysis of coverage of the 2005 Songhua River chemical spill, supply further evidence that Chinese media are not homogeneous. "We were quite surprised to find CCTV, a huge news organization that is technically still owned and operated by the central government, airing news segments that exposed and condemned a major government cover-up," they write. They attribute CCTV's evident ability to control coverage of this story to greater financial independence—and suggest that increasingly even state-run news organizations inhabit a growing social sphere of collective interest between the state and informal society. Sullivan and Xie (2009) find preliminary evidence that communication about environmental activism on the Internet draws in diverse actors, including both unofficial and state, interrelating both informally and formally around various objectives in complex online social networks.

Such findings dovetail with some of the political science literature on China, such as the work of Mertha (2009), who argues that a system he characterizes as "fragmented authoritarianism" is becoming surprisingly pluralized, with what he calls "policy entrepreneurs"—including from the media—gaining access to policy processes. In the field of hydropower development, he gives examples of how interests among various agents can converge in a serendipitous manner, with media outlets and individual media producers playing an important role in the forging and recognition of shared interests.

While absolutist constructions of totalistic state control over media have been largely abandoned, some studies suggest that China's media succumb to direct political pressure on certain subjects and at certain times (Chen, 2005; E. Zhang & Fleming, 2005). Pugsley (2006) adds the twist of narrative analysis, finding that in times of controversy or crisis the Chinese news media give voice to officially constructed stories in culturally familiar ways. Zhang (2006) likewise concludes that political power governs the construction of current affairs programs to a greater extent during crisis. However, Tong (2007) suggests somewhat the opposite: that controversial events can provide openings for assertive journalistic practice. Tong (2009)

also argues that journalists' strategic editing of reports on politically sensitive topics helps further the prospects for publication of controversial news.

More commonly, scholars see a chronic tug-of-war between media and the state that spawns various configurations of benefits for opposing parties. Huang (2003, 2007) emphasizes the idea of adaptation within fairly strong structural determinants, and discerns that the pragmatic requisites of absorbing private, including foreign, capital as well as managerial needs have spurred transition to a "capitalist corporation" model of media that is still politically and financially state-controlled. Yet he maintains that greater structural diversity and openness in the media market also will promote journalistic professionalism and deter corruption. Wang (2010) finds that local journalists, while respecting explicit boundaries, actively employ a variety of "strategies for mild resistance" vis-à-vis government pressures.

Lin Jie (2004), offering a Chinese media producer's perspective while a Neiman fellow on leave from her producer job at CCTV, characterizes state and profession as pitted against each other in trying to leverage advantages through the market. "As a special force functioning in an overlapping area of political and economic realms, China's media now seem to stand at a critical point," she writes; "the more the government allows or even encourages the media to perform as a commercial unit, the more certain will it raise unavoidable and crucial challenges to the current political structure." Meanwhile, she suggests, a kind of accommodation has emerged in which the Chinese government's "optimistic" belief that media content can be separated from media management is working out quite well.

Chan (2002, 2007) suggests the state is the more agile agent in these times; he sees media organizations as compliant in the service of exercising ideological hegemony by using ever more subtle and flexible methods. Stockmann (2010), studying Beijing residents' views on anti-Japanese protests in the spring of 2005, identifies a kind of "outsourcing" of media control to the market—as long as the commercialized press is reflecting government views. Her view is that commercialization actually promotes the state's ability to influence public opinion through the mass media.

In her empirically rich thesis on China's television industry, Xu (2010) finds that new central government policies and practices have shifted production risks to independent TV producers, who engage in a variety of cautious negotiating strategies that result in ideologically safe content. She concludes that commercialization, channel specialization, and other reforms promoted by the state since China's admission to the World Trade

Organization have not attenuated state control, and in some respects have strengthened it.

Hassid (2008) cautions against regarding Chinese journalists as either an arm of the party-state institutional structure or as advocates for citizens' interests, calling them "contentious actors in their own right." He, too, however, identifies the push for journalistic independence from the state as a primary dynamic, working against political and economic externalities. His study is problematic in that it relies for evidence mainly on high-profile episodes of journalistic resistance, not on original fieldwork; his examples do, however, lead him to conclude that "purely structural approaches" to understanding politics are insufficient.

The difficulty of disentangling state forces from market forces emerges in Xin's (2006) examination of the Xinhua News Agency. This study finds that competition from other outlets has forced what was once an exclusive state-sponsored content provider into a strategy of diversification, and thus the ostensibly official news service has transformed itself from an apparatus of the propaganda system into a client-oriented operation in which newspapers and other entities using its services have gained leverage. In such a struggle within the field of news production, political and economic interests simultaneously are in cahoots and at odds not only among organizational actors but also within these very organizations.

Zhao (2000) envisions a multifaceted strategic alliance represented by "watchdog journalism" that ultimately, and most importantly, strengthens the power of the state. In her analysis, investigative reporting has emerged primarily from party and state imperatives to "reassert control over a dysfunctional bureaucracy" and reinforce the central leadership's legitimacy, while also serving journalists' professional interests and media organization's commercial interests.

Huang Dan (2011) similarly sees the policy of "supervision by public opinion" (*yulun jiandu*) as an instrument extended by the party-state to facilitate administrative effectiveness and promote legitimacy. Huang's analysis of the ostensibly hard-hitting TV news program, China Central Television's *Focus*, finds its content aligned with party and government interests. The watchdog mission does provide some space for criticism as well as for promoting technical aspects of journalistic professionalism; but at bottom, what seems to favor journalistic autonomy and independence is merely "strategic rhetoric," Huang writes. In sum, "the media's ability to serve as a check on power is a mechanism for self-adjustment and self-improvement within the established power structure" (p. 110).

In contrast, Tong and Sparks (2009) see institutionalized practices of journalistic investigation as primarily market-driven, and secondarily undergirded by a developing professional ideology among journalists. Tong (2010), further qualifying premises of centralized media control and confluence of interest between political and economic power, casts central authorities in a curiously progressive role versus elites at the local level who collude to counteract central policies.

Sun's (2006) case study of contention over supervision of a town TV station offers more nuanced distinctions for understanding state actors, finding a loss of central authority as local governments at different levels prove capable of manipulating the media market in their own interests. Dispersal of control and juggling of interests emerge again in Sun's (2010) examination of "public opinion supervision," in which government, commercial media, and journalists form strategic relationships premised on assessments of risks and gains.

Pugsley (2010), reviewing the succession of high-profile news stories emerging from China during 2008—the Olympics (a "celebratory media event"), the Tibet disturbances and torch relay demonstrations ("conflicted" media events), the Sichuan earthquake (disaster), and tainted milk (scandal)—asserts that international news flows have attenuated CCTV's role as "central gatekeeper" for news coverage, making it harder for the Chinese state to control the broadcast of media events. However, he maintains that the state still defines and regulates "cultural forms and practices" shaping national culture as reflected in domestic media.

These statements may seem self-evident, but they find considerable qualification in Chin's (2011) study of central government efforts to facilitate the entry of overseas TV programming into China from 2000 to 2008. The empirical evidence reveals complex and subtle interactions between provincial-level authorities, national policymakers, and other actors, with different parties exploiting their own points of leverage. Policy is initiated from the top, Chin observes, whereupon the central authorities face a delicate balancing act, relying on lower levels for management and sanctions while also trying to prevent abuse of this ceded administrative flexibility. Provincial officials and broadcasters, meanwhile, intervene during policy implementation and revision in ways that may stymie central government objectives. In Guangdong, Chin finds, provincial interests countered central policy by promoting stricter barriers to access, more extensive regulation, and other measures, including blocking signals, with the aim of fending off domination of the local media market by overseas TV.

Mass communication research typically distinguishes reception from

production for purposes of both theorizing and empirical study. Conceptualizing media production as a field, however, requires integral consideration of the audience dimension. Ryfe (2006, p. 206) makes the case well: "Because it sits between social actors, the news is especially sensitive to the shared, constitutive commitments of its community of readers. More simply, the news takes it shape in large part from the public it serves."

Among China scholars who underscore the role of audiences in shaping news production and product, Zhang (2000) proposes that changes in the official ideological positioning of media audiences, coupled with commercialization, have created new institutional space for the flexing of journalistic muscles as well as new managerial methods. Sun, Chang, and Yu (2001) suggest the importance of audience in the marketplace helps explain why market-oriented media are on the rise as official party organs flounder. Although these examples incorporate audience into the analysis, empirical studies probing the audience-producer interrelationship in the Chinese context have yet to be devised.

As a side note, the desirability of research designs that gauge actual practices (as opposed to self-reports) is reinforced by a number of cautionary studies revealing disjunctures between attitudes and action. De Burgh (2003) found that Hangzhou TV reporters' beliefs about journalists' social responsibilities were not manifested in actual news reports. On the basis of a survey of Guangzhou journalists, Lin Fen (2010) identifies both changing demographics and new "complexity" in journalists' attitudes and behavior arising from the combination of party values and professional values. In general, she says, journalists tend to be "inactively liberal"—in particular, despite liberal beliefs, professional agency seldom emerges in actual coverage of political, cultural, or moral issues.

Cumulatively, such empirical studies can further the larger project of explaining how the journalistic field interacts with other fields, including political, economic, legal, and technological fields; and elucidate how changes in adjoining fields might impinge upon, interpenetrate, alter, compete with, or otherwise disturb the field of journalistic production in ways that modify news practices and products and realign public constructions of meaning (Benson, 1999; Peterson & Anand, 2004). Unsurprisingly, as Internet penetration advances and electronic modes of communication grow in volume, variety, and salience, researchers have turned increasing attention to media technologies. To date, however, few studies from the Chinese context shed light on how technology might figure in the news production mix.

He and Zhu (2002), employing "ecology" and "virtual community" as

organizing concepts in an early study of online editions of Chinese news-papers, provide a start with their attempt to forecast the prospects for on-line papers in light of social factors interacting with telecommunications infrastructure and formal characteristics of new communication technologies. At the time, they judge online editions not yet viable in light of weak and primitive infrastructure, uneven distribution, and excessive cost to consumers in conjunction with political and social constraints; and attribute the content homogeneity of print and online editions to similar factors. The study sets a good example in its endeavor to integrate technology into a larger picture, even if the pace of Internet development in China has superseded the findings.

Xin's (2010) study of interactions between conventional news media and "citizen journalism" from blogs and other informal channels yields fairly predictable findings—that netizen accounts are an increasingly important news source for mainstream outlets in China as well as constituting an alternative conduit for information, while party controls still shape public use of the Web. More noteworthy is attention to the element of interactivity, which is certainly vital to understanding how technology alters the interactions of audiences and producers in the new media environment, and thus germane to studying restructuring of the field of news production.

An additional caveat against ascribing too much potency to grassroots media activity comes from Pugsley (2010), whose study of Chinese coverage of major domestic news events during 2008 suggests the state maintains overall hegemony over media culture even as global influences erode aspects of state control. In this context, he cautions that the role of citizen journalists should not be over-estimated given their limited "ability to create ongoing networks of dependable news-gathering."

Examining joint ventures in China's Internet industry, Weber and Jia (2007) do not address news media per se, but their findings nevertheless are suggestive for understanding changes in fields of media production, especially the element of self-restraint. Their focus is the fast-growing online entertainment sector, in the service of which state media employ what they call "strategic commercialization," an approach intended to elicit maximum returns through appeals to consumer audiences. The strategy includes co-production arrangements and importation of cultural content, encouraging domestic Internet portals to make cooperative deals with global media firms for developing online services and products. Case studies of several such joint ventures suggest that the most successful hinge on "targeted" entertainment provision, with technology coordinated with content needs.

The authors highlight that local partners almost invariably have signed an official "pledge" that includes the promise to conform to government content restrictions. Such self-regulation, they say, insulates foreign operators from content control issues and puts the onus on domestic service providers. In other words, self-regulatory provisions limit foreign investors' perceived risks and make partnerships more attractive, while enlisting the complicity of domestic firms in facilitating state influence and control, thus promoting state interests in both economic and political realms.

Weber and Jia, in identifying points of articulation between domestic and global agents along with related interactions among domestic entities, link the local with the global in a way that illuminates process as well as product. Studies such as this help point the way for scholars trying to make connections between the local and the global in an accessible and measurable manner. It is tempting to seek explanations for local-global interactions at high levels of abstraction. Yet, along with C.C. Lee in this volume, I would argue that closely focused local studies remain essential for understanding the workings of the global system.

A primary concern of globalization studies has been the question of cultural integrity—that is, the ability of national cultures to resist the onslaught of American or Western culture. Knight (2006), in an insightful essay on globalization's implications for China, calls for much greater precision regarding sources of cultural authority, and his reasoning further accents the importance of localized study: "So-called 'national' cultures are very likely to be constructed and maintained by national governments in the attempt to instil in their often culturally diverse populations a unified national consciousness that will deliver political unity and loyalty to the state. Consequently, these fragile politically constructed national cultures may well be more subject to the erosive effects of globalisation than cultures attached to particular locations and communities, where the linkage of place and culture remains strong. The impact of globalisation is likely to be different at these different levels" (p. 4).

Zhu (2001) distinguishes "theorizing" and "indigenizing" approaches to research on Chinese mass communication, defined respectively by their pursuit of the universal versus the unique, and favors research strategies that integrate both. Lee (2004) has called for developing theoretical visions from China's cultural specifics. Both are eloquent calls for knitting local study with attempts to fathom the workings of human society more broadly. And the inescapable recognition that China is ever more entwined with transnational movements of goods, people, ideas, information, money,

and all the other elements propelling globalization means that China can never be considered in isolation; this applies to rural interior China as much as to the metropolises. Making empirical linkages between fields of media production with this larger set of externalities is surely one of the greatest challenges facing international communication scholars.

On Staying Grounded, Flexible, and Good-Humored

I have attempted to show how an approach inspired by Giddens's concept of structuration and Bourdieu's notion of fields of media production can help us sort out the wide range of empirical findings emerging from the Chinese newswork context as well as contributing to formulation of future studies. I have also expressed common cause with scholars who emphasize closely focused grounded study. In furtherance of this project, and by way of conclusion, I would offer two additional guiding concepts for international communication research: *circumstances* and *serendipity*. Finally I propose a third, optional but highly recommended, principle: *whimsy*.

The literature spurring this tripartite formulation comes not from the field of communication, nor from social theory, but rather from management and organization studies. It is nearly four decades since organizational theorists Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) introduced what has become a classic, if still-debated, rejoinder to scholarship premised on assumptions of regularity and rationality in human systems with their article "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice." Their purpose was to explain decision making in organizations characterized by fluid participation, shifting technologies, and changing objectives, which are "characteristic of any organization in part—part of the time" but "particularly conspicuous in public, educational, and illegitimate organizations," they explained (p. 1).

Within organizations, they proposed, decisions arise from interplay among numerous factors that combine in unpredictable ways. These factors, furthermore, consist of "streams" of ingredients—specifically, flows of choices, problems, solutions, and participants with varying degrees of involvement. "From this point of view," they wrote, "an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work" (p. 2).

The garbage can analogy was not meant to be pejorative; rather, it supplied an easily grasped metaphor for a messy conjuncture of phenomena.

The authors concluded that, while their garbage can process was not particularly successful in resolving problems, it did enable choices to be made and problems to be addressed in ambiguous and variable environments. The model, as Olsen later summarized (2001, p. 193), "views organizational life as highly contextual, driven primarily by timing and coincidence."

These scholars have since extended their work (e.g., March & Olsen, 1989, 1995) into larger institutional realms of governance, democracy, the military, and the nature of national, regional, and international political orders, promoting an approach known as the "new institutionalism." A handful of media scholars have applied the new institutionalism to news production to explain phenomena such as content homogeneity across news organizations (Cook, 2006) and the sometimes surprising counterpoint, content variability (Ryfe, 2006).

Concerns at the institutional level may eclipse quixotic explanations of decision making within single organizations, but the fundamental posture expressed in the garbage can model endures: human affairs are best understood not as outcomes of rational calculations and orderly processes but rather as historically contingent and socially emergent. From this perspective, distinctive socio-cultural understandings govern action, while socially constructed rules and practices themselves are continually molded through interactions and experience, and institutional structures are created, maintained, and transformed in interplay with multiple interests, changing resources, and twists of history.

With circumstances and serendipity as operative concepts, the garbage can model and its institutional augmentations are suggestive for the study of media, including comparative and transnational media research. The scheme originates from a certain kind of setting (fluid) with the presence of certain factors (choices, problems, solutions, participants), presenting identifiable, describable circumstances. And interactions among the key factors, producing not particularly efficient or sensible outcomes, are animated by serendipity—not pure chance or luck, but rather a mix that creates opportunity for those opportunely positioned (see Golin, 1957; also Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, & Lieblich, 2008).

Circumstances are "facts on the ground," practices and routines, behaviors and actions, comportment and relationships, by and among agencies of human society, from individual actors to encompassing structures. They are the stuff of description, but also the basic ingredients of any social configuration. Serendipity, a term often found in accounts of scientific discovery, refers to how circumstances combine and interact in ways that agents

who don't control this confluence may nonetheless avail themselves of opportunities thus created. It is the stuff of explanation and analysis. These terms in themselves do not suggest theories or models; rather, they offer organizing principles for how to approach the challenges of social research. They also should help call attention to culturally revealing anomalies, exceptions, and outliers, which conventional social science is apt to discard. For the most vivid exaggerations or egregious departures from "normality" may be significant cultural markers in their own way, no less important than the common patterns and prevailing standards that fill the bell of the normal curve.

For scholars whose pride does not prevent playfulness, the garbage can model also suggests a third principle—that of *whimsy*. In their original 1972 article, evidently in anticipation of those who might question the seriousness of their intent, Cohen, March, and Olsen translated the model into quantitative form for computer simulation (employing the programming language current at the time, Fortran), a touch that seemed to offer assurances of rigor and sobriety. But in the main narrative, the authors clearly were happy to sound a bit silly by using an everyday object as theoretical terminology—betraying, I would hope, a general commitment to levity as a stimulus for discussion and discovery.

Responding to a dissection of the garbage can model long after the original article's publication (Bendor, 2001), we find reaffirmation of this propensity from Olsen (2001, p. 192), who likens what he viewed as the critics' lack of imagination to "the grumbling of humorless people who accidentally wander into the lively part of town." Ultimately, whimsy is a property of the scholar's disposition, and might be seen as a call for modesty in the purported understandings we assert for our work.

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