

## NEWS DOESN'T NECESSARILY EQUAL UNDERSTANDING

Reflections on China reporting at a time of transition

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There's a quixotic bill that was introduced into the US House of Representatives last year called the "Chinese Media Reciprocity Act" that would, should it ever pass, limit official Chinese media in Washington to the number of government-sponsored US media in Beijing.

The bill attempts to redress some of the many complaints foreign reporters have about life in China:

- the difficulty in getting visas
- the sometimes impossibility of getting visas
- harassment
- even expulsion

These compare to the relatively free and open access Chinese journalists have getting accreditation into the United States.

But I would argue this isn't a numbers game.

This is an understanding issue. And the fundamental opacity of Chinese official life combined with fundamental flaws in the western journalistic narrative stand in the way of true understanding – no matter the numbers.

As we gather here shortly before the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, let's just catalogue what we don't know.

And remember, this is what we “don’t know” even after the weight of the entire foreign journalistic and diplomatic communities have been trying to find out for months!

We don’t know exactly when the congress will be.

We don’t know, though we have some assumptions, who will emerge into the politburo and standing committee of the politburo.

We don’t know how, or if, the new administration will be different from the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao decade.

We don’t know who will be the winners and losers.

We don’t, frankly, really and truly understand.

It is somewhat ironic to be claiming there’s an understanding crisis.

We’re at a point where, despite the real problems getting accreditation, there are more foreign correspondents in China than ever before.

We’re at a point where, despite official prohibitions on their being formally accredited, more Chinese nationals are working for foreign news organisations than ever before. That means literally hundreds of smart, well-educated, bilingual journalists multiplying the reporting power of the foreign bureaus by a massive factor.

We’re at a point where social media and mobile networks in China link up half a billion people. They are hooked up, on line and having their thoughts and statements and rumors beamed to whoever wants to or is able to or has the time to listen. This makes the lives of ordinary Chinese closer to the foreign correspondent than ever before.

And we're at point where the news from China has an unprecedented spot on the media agenda. The confluence of China's size, China's economic might, the world's fear and fascination and a seemingly never-ending stream of economic, political, social and diplomatic events have editors and readers screaming for more.

But more "what" is the question.

And is more better?

And are we being better served?

I'd like to examine these questions today.

Let's take a step back to how it was.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the American journalists weren't in China at all. They covered Beijing from Hong Kong or Tokyo.

The Europeans, if they were in Beijing, had single man bureaus, usually staffed by someone without Chinese language skills.

That didn't mean they were inconsequential. On the contrary, sometimes they made news in a spectacular way.

One of my predecessors as Beijing bureau chief – sorry, I should say "Peking bureau chief", for Reuters didn't switch to the official rendering of the capital's name until 1989 – was Anthony Grey, who was detained under house arrest during the Cultural Revolution for 27 months between 1967 and 1969. This was neither the first nor the last time that journalism, foreign, and domestic affairs became entangled.

Grey's imprisonment was not for his reporting, but in retaliation for the jailing of Chinese reporters in Hong Kong by the British colonial government of the time.

This showed that China saw journalists very much as an extension of the nation they "represented" – and frankly that situation is little changed decades later.

By the 1980s, bureaus had begun to grow. Americans joined the Europeans, the Japanese and the Russians in Beijing.

Some of the highlights of my tour as bureau chief in the 1990s were bringing a television presence to Reuters and opening a Shanghai bureau.

But how did we do our jobs?

There was heavy newspaper work – combing through the People’s Daily and a huge stack of provincial papers every day looking for interesting clues as to what was happening and what was changing.

There was Xinhua monitoring – staying glued to the teleprinter as it chugged out official pronouncements. Boring as it sounds that’s how we found out about, and flashed to the world, official word on leadership changes like Jiang Zemin’s ascension to Party chief, Jiang Qing’s death, diplomatic manoeuvring and most statistics.

We listened assiduously to the radio and TV news – that’s how we got plane crashes and the end of the “foreign exchange certificates” and the beginning of China’s long road to exchange rate reform.

There were weekly Foreign Ministry press briefings. Quarterly statistical bureau briefings.

And the slow development of sources – real live people.

But let’s be clear – being the source of a foreign correspondent in China has never been the easiest of positions, nor the easiest of relationships!

With so many facts considered state secrets – and their revelation punishable by long prison sentences – sources had to, and still have to, consider their positions very carefully.

So who were – and are -- those sources?

- People with nothing left to lose – for example artists or dissidents. But by their very nature they have limited knowledge – though endless and entertaining theories – about what is happening
- People who are very brave or who think their broader relationships give them licence to take some risks
- People who become true friends – who may or may not have had knowledge that was useful to a story
- People whose jobs and positions give them a need to exchange information like academics and researchers
- People who become sources as part of their job
- People with an axe to grind or a point of view to push

Clearly that's not a terribly diverse or balanced list. But it is a list that hasn't changed that much today.

A good rule of thumb is always: those who know don't talk; those who talk are speaking for a reason.

You need your sources. But your sources also need you, and understanding their reasons for talking and the trail of how knowledge flows finally to you is the only way to ensure good reporting.

A diligent new correspondent with average Chinese language skills might have a dozen or so key people on their source list by the end of his or her second year. But remember, for most news organisations, a standard tour in China is three or at the most four years.

Most news organisations deliberately lose their China expertise almost the moment they finally gain it.

There are only a very, very few correspondents with six, eight, 10 or more years of experience combined with excellent Chinese language ability. They are a minority within the existing minority of the foreign media community.

To be very blunt, the number of sources for foreign correspondents compared to an overall population of 1.3 billion is an extremely tiny ratio. It isn't a representative sample. It isn't always a useful sample. It isn't always a reliable sample.

Now, to be sure, the foreign correspondent's job is to extrapolate.

That is true in any country of the world.

The journalist takes an anecdote, links it to a fact, tests it with a few trusted sounding boards, checks and, one hopes, rechecks and, voila, comes up with a trend.

But it doesn't take much to make that equation become distorted.

Let's jump to the situation today.

They are, as I said, more foreign correspondents in China than ever before.

But there is also more information and more demand than ever before. And that means that there has simply not been a concomitant increase in illumination or understanding.

The Foreign Ministry now briefs five times per week. But how much can it really say?

There's a regular staccato drumbeat of statistical releases. But do we have confidence in the picture they paint?

Business people are willing to be quoted by name and to give interviews. But how much will they actually reveal?

The Internet hums with a roar of noise passing for fact, opinion, surmise and titillation that needs to be parsed, filtered and weighed.

Local newspapers, once nearly lock step with their Beijing cousins, now are filled with reporting and often surprise.

Magazines push the boundaries with investigations and comment.

Books come out with fascinating titbits and leads.

But it is a rare correspondent or bureau that can keep up. And in nearly drowning in the sea of information, they actually lose a lot of ability to select, analyse and illuminate.

The signal to noise ratio is out of whack. And with it has gone the nuanced, full picture of China that the world really needs.

Let's look at some key recent stories to see some of the difficulty in foreign reportage.

- The case of Ai Weiwei
- The case of Chen Guangcheng
- The hard landing vs. soft landing economic debate
- The Bo Xilai/Gu Kailai/ Wang Lijun/Neil Heywood murder mystery
- The Xi Jinping disappearance and re-emergence

In each of these, the journalism has been shaped by close and good reporting. But it has also been influenced by the "expected" narrative. Reporting has focussed on what is interesting in the moment as much as on what is ultimately important. It has indulged outside expectations, sometimes at the expense of inside realities. And, as often happens in journalism, drama has trumped analysis.

Ai Weiwei is a great symbol of dissent. An artist who has worked in the West, sold in the West and exhibited in the West, he is fearless and outspoken.

When he was arrested and held for alleged economic crimes he became a potent way for foreign journalists to bring messages home to their audiences about China's repression of dissent, highhanded treatment of dissidents, use of the law to instil fear and obedience and a host of other themes.

I'm not stating for a moment that these themes aren't worth exploring, or that Ai isn't a fascinating figure for study.

What I am saying is that the story became simplistic in the telling, to the extent that when I talk to people in the US or Europe about him, the absolute assumption is that the tax charges must be false and the absolute belief is that Ai Weiwei is some vivid national figure known in provinces far and wide.

Neither that assumption nor that belief can be taken at face value.

I don't know of any reporting that has looked deeply into Ai Weiwei's finances or his tax situation – a hard story to do, to be sure, but I would have thought one that would have added nuance to the narrative.

Similarly, the story of Chen Guangcheng, the blind activist who escaped from brutal house arrest to take refuge in the US embassy in Beijing only then to be granted and accept exile, has the drama and excitement to make it an instant front page hit worldwide.

The key question for me, though, is the extent to which this remains a story of an individual's past or becomes a story about China's future. Does Chen have the credibility and standing to predict or influence events?

Too many people on reading foreign correspondence on an Ai or a Chen or on one of many dissidents from an early time leap to the conclusion that they have a huge following and a resonance within China. The truth far too often is that their main resonance is within the foreign community itself.



Let's leave dissidents for the moment and turn to the economy.

Will China have a hard landing or a soft?

Perhaps it was inevitable, but the unbridled optimism and bullishness about China's economy swung this year into seemingly untrammelled despair. When the narrative zeitgeist changed, it changed with a vengeance.

Is that wrong?

Of course it isn't totally wrong – there has been a long string of disappointing statistics; China itself has revised growth downward; many Chinese analysts sigh about the end of the boom times. But most stories have no room for the greys and ambiguities, and audiences who don't have time to do their own research are left with nightmarish visions of empty new cities and an economy on the verge of tipping over on the roller coaster.

Do we know how this story will turn out? I certainly don't. What I wish is that more stories admitted that we don't know how the economic tale will end up rather than lurching from the bright to the dark like a Manichean philosopher on steroids.

By far the story that has gripped foreign audiences the most this year has been the Chongqing Murder Mystery, not least because the victim was British and had ties to a company that was founded by former intelligence officers.

What could be more exciting than whiffs of corruption and James Bond, played out like a soap opera?

A lot of the reporting on this has been terrific. Lots of details came out first in the foreign press to be later corroborated by official accounts. There's been vivid, smart and fast journalism that has given audiences an amazing glimpse of the dark side of Chinese elite politics.

But what we don't know in this story is as fascinating as what we do know and here we run hard up against the adage that your reporting is only as good as your sources. To what extent has the reporting itself been part of the political struggle? Which details have been selectively leaked? What truly set off the train of events? What we accept now as the truth may well need to be drastically revised by later historians.

Similarly, we may not really know what happened to Xi Jinping during his two weeks out of the public eye.

But this one may well turn out to have been a tale that was fascinating at the time but ultimately unimportant. Sometimes a bad back is just a bad back; sometimes it is more. Sometimes you just never know.

The biggest lesson from this story, however, is how limited a view any of us have to what's going on and how the most lurid rumors can gain currency and circulation in the absence of confirmed fact.

But here's the problem – to the average foreign consumer of news outside of Asia, what is China today?

A country whose next leader is unstable and disappears for no reason, while opposition forces led by an artist and a blind activist challenge the status quo? A country on the brink of economic crisis? A country where major political figures solve problems by murder when their economic interests are challenged? And by the way, one ready to bristle with military posturing if its sovereignty over the islands known variously as Senkaku or Diaoyu is questioned.

The problem is that there are kernels of truth all around. All these stories are accurate as far as they go. But in the telling of the tale too much of the nuance is lost in the drive to gain readers and grab attention.

I'm not saying foreign correspondents do a bad job – far from it. In the face of truly difficult challenges, they put together really interesting and often informative reports.

But the challenges of China and the problems of traditional journalistic narrative fight against what's really needed, which is more and better understanding.

To get that, you need to step away from traditional foreign correspondence, I believe.

Let me conclude by mentioning three of the most useful and insightful sources for getting that illumination.

First: Bill Bishop's Sinocism (<http://sinocism.com>), which uses really smart curation, aggregation and analysis to bring the best writing on China to the fore every day.

Old-style foreign correspondence was a singular activity – I used my sources to write my report and you subscribed to me. Sinocism really gets the new media imperative to link, curate and aggregate to the best around, wherever that may come from.

Second: This university's China Media Project <http://cmp.hku.hk> publishes useful and insightful studies of what's happening in the amazingly vibrant world of media.

And finally: Tea Leaf Nation <http://tealeafnation.com>, which does a brilliant job of drawing conclusions about society from wide reading in social media.

What these three have in common is that they would not have existed in the old media world.

What they have in common is they are new ways of dealing with an old problem.

What they have in common is they are smart, irreverent, and wide-ranging in where they gain information and how they give credit.

We are well into a new era of China reporting.

With China the world's second largest economy, the demands for more and more information will not go away. But the ultimate winners will only be those who add value and insight to the information.

Media needs to change to embrace new methods of reporting and new standards for analysis.

China needs to change and understand that its place in the world comes with a responsibility to be more transparent, both to its own media and to the world's foreign correspondents.

And the audience needs to understand that in order to see China as it truly is, it needs to be open to a much more nuanced and complex narrative.

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