

COMMENTARY

'See the Difference': What Difference? The New Missions of Chinese International Communication

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This paper discusses the strategies of China Global Television Network (CGTN), founded on 31 December 2016, with a focus on the analysis of its slogan 'See the difference'. It is argued that as China enters a new era, CGTN is carrying out two new missions of Chinese international communication: (1) to present a true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view of China by adopting a more open and inclusive attitude, and (2) to promote the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind by providing a platform for a variety of voices and perspectives. The paper was written shortly before the announcement in March 2018 that China's national and international TV and radio networks are to be combined to form a new organisation known internationally as 'Voice of China'.

Keywords: China; CGTN; new missions; international communication

Introduction

Mass media in China have been integrated into the country's development mission since the establishment of the socialist system in 1949, to mobilise people for the construction of a prosperous 'new China' internally; and externally, to gain acknowledgement and acceptance from the outside world. Recently, with changes within China itself as well as in the international community, the external mission of Chinese mass media has been constantly adjusting itself accordingly; meanwhile, technological development has brought drastic changes to China's media landscape (see the editorial preface of this volume for a review).

As the use of the internet has become a part of people's everyday life in China, President Xi Jinping has urged media to strengthen what he termed the 'internet way of thinking' and speed up the 'convergence' between traditional media, the internet and the mobile internet.

To cope with global trends in media convergence, China Global Television Network (CGTN) was launched by the national broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) on the last day of 2016, as a rebranding of CCTVNEWS which was an English news channel formerly known as CCTV9 (for a review of CCTV's 'going-out' practices in history, see Hu, Ji & Gong 2018). CGTN is a multi-language, multi-platform media grouping, which consists of six TV channels

(including the main 24-hour English language news channel CGTN-English, and CGTN Spanish, French, Arabic and Russian, as well as CGTN Documentary), a video content provider and a digital media division. It is headquartered at the landmark CCTV building in Beijing, with production centres in Washington and Nairobi, and a European production centre on the way. To fulfil the demands of global viewers and users for easier access to content on different platforms, CGTN follows the 'mobile-first' strategy. Once installed and opened, the CGTN mobile app will immediately show the slogan of CGTN 'See the difference'. What does it mean?

See what difference? In CGTN's own words

According to the CGTN Controller Jiang Heping (2017a, p.24), the slogan 'See the difference' means 'different coverage for the same world; different perspectives for the same coverage'.¹

In an interview with Wu, Li & Zhao (submitted), the Controller of CGTN-English Liu Cong elaborated on this, explaining that:

In the past, the slogans we used for CCTV9 and CCTVNEWS include "Your window on China and the World", "Your link to Asia", and then "Your link to the world". But now the new slogan doesn't distinguish between China, Asia and the world. Because we now put ourselves in a global framework, concerning with global issues including China's issues which have a global influence. We now underscore a shared future for mankind. We would like to provide a platform for different, or I'd like to use the phrase "a variety of", voices, not just voice of China, but also voices of other Asian countries, of African countries and of Latin American nations.

As stated on its official website, CGTN would like to create a better understanding of international events across the world, bridging continents and bringing a more balanced view to global news reporting (CGTN, 2018).

To achieve this, in other words, for audiences to actually 'see the difference', CGTN has adopted the following approaches.

Firstly, an integrated communication strategy. CGTN has realised that in the words of Jiang Heping:

The general trend in the media industry is shifting towards mobile access, video content, and platform integration [...] Reflecting the priority we give to mobile distribution in our integrated communication, we have established the CGTN News Centre to coordinate the work of our Beijing headquarters with that of our North American and African operations. The News Centre directs the production of news content in five languages – English, Spanish, French, Arabic and Russian – which is then distributed via television, mobile networks, our news app and digital media, and also as video footage (Jiang, 2017b).

Secondly, an audience/user-oriented approach. For CGTN, one vital aspect of integrated communication is the audiences/users. 'Our users are fundamental. And our audience is our "God"' (Jiang, 2017b). The Controller of CGTN-English Ms. Liu considers this as the major distinction between CGTN and CCTV (Wu, Li & Zhao, submitted). According to Ms. Liu, the targeted audiences of CGTN are mainly foreign audiences abroad (including, they hope, Western mainstream people and society) and the target users of the news app are of course the younger generation; through audience research as well as through consulting foreign experts and personnel, CGTN deals with issues that are attractive to the targeted audiences.

For instance, when reporting on significant topics such as Chinese military spending, the 'China threat' theory and the Belt and Road Initiative, the research group of CGTN would analyse the foreign media to see what specifically they are interested in, and the foreign experts and personnel recruited by CGTN would provide a list of questions related to the issues (Wu, Li & Zhao, submitted).

Thirdly, with respect to mechanism and management, CGTN sticks to what it summarises as the five 'I's: innovative, invigorated, interconnected, inclusive, and interactive. According to the CGTN Controller Jiang (2017b), 'Innovation is the key to development; unburdened by historical baggage, CGTN is eager to pursue innovation and blaze a new trail in the integrated development of television and digital media'. 'Invigorated' means that CGTN adopts invigorated and dynamic approaches when gathering news content and presenting it on both their TV channels and digital media platforms, to attract more audiences and users who enjoy watching their programmes and are willing to interact with them; by being interconnected, CGTN aims to achieve integration and cohesion, as well as regulated operations and production across the whole organization (Jiang, 2017a, b). In addition, having defined 'inclusiveness' as a prerequisite for its growth, CGTN provides a climate in which reformers and innovators can flourish (Jiang, 2017b). Interactivity is considered by CGTN as the basis of integrated communication; by embracing the idea that communication is no longer one-way, CGTN aims to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation between traditional broadcasting and digital media, in the words of CGTN controller Jiang (2017b) 'by integrating the content of conventional and modern terminals and their respective audiences, we hope to create a virtuous circle between tabletop screen and handheld device, and to achieve the targeted distribution of information.'

Among the five 'I's, 'inclusiveness has been defined as a prerequisite for CGTN's growth' (Jiang, 2017b). In the interview with Wu, Li & Zhao (submitted), the Controller of CGTN-English Liu Cong said, 'one of the distinctions between CGTN and CCTV lies in this as well. CGTN adopts a more open and inclusive attitude towards sensitive issues. As long as our national interest is not jeopardised, our news reports can cover a wide range of topics, because we want to establish ourselves as a media trusted by the public. [...] Just as President Xi Jinping said, we would like to present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China to the world. Of course, in this view of China, there may be positive dimensions, but there may also be negative aspects.'

Any difference seen so far?

The integrated communication strategy of CGTN has optimised resource sharing to some extent, thanks to CGTN's newly established News Centre. Compared to CCTVNEWS, CGTN has access to not only real-time TV and digital media content generated by CCTV, but also information provided by more than 25,000 global internet outlets and 70 of the world's leading media organizations (Jiang, 2017b). However, although CGTN strives to follow 'the principles of versatile news gathering, sharing across platforms and distribution through multiple channels and terminals' (Jiang, 2017b), it still needs time to deal with the relationships between its Beijing headquarters and the overseas production centres, and between CGTN-English and the other language channels (Jiang, 2017a). So far, localisation of news content for different regions and different language groups has not been evident; although according to Jiang (2017a), this is indeed what CGTN is endeavouring to achieve, as this also conforms to its audience/user-oriented approach.

Has the audience/user-oriented approach of CGTN been demonstrated through CGTN's behaviour? Apart from audience research mentioned above, CGTN has tried to interact with the audiences when reporting and presenting news contents. During the opening session of

the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, CGTN explored a new strategy of polling, gathering opinions through a focus group which represented all walks of life in society, and presenting the group's opinions live on the screen (Jiang, 2017c). This shows that CGTN is indeed implementing its 'innovative' and 'invigorated' ideas to achieve 'interactivity' with the audiences.

Based on the audience/user figures, the audience/user-oriented approach of CGTN can be considered to have had some effect. In the past, the ability of CCTVNEWS to reach out to the outside world has been questioned, e.g. Flew (2017) stated 'closer inspection of audience figures suggested that its TV viewership – which was in practice estimated at about 50 million – largely consisted of the Chinese diaspora and the Chinese nationals viewing its programs within China, possibly to improve their English language'. Today, the 'Mobile First' strategy and the use of various Western social media platforms have brought CGTN a larger range of audiences. According to Jiang (2017b), 'CGTN's TV channels are currently available in 170 countries and regions worldwide, watched by a total of 387 million viewers; its various digital media platforms boast more than 87 million global subscribers [...] Launched simultaneously with CGTN was its mobile news app. Of more than 3.1 million downloads to date, 95% have originated outside China'. As of early November 2017, CGTN's YouTube account had garnered over 300 million hits, and its English Facebook account had attracted 52.69 million subscribers, more than any other media organization in the world (Jiang, 2017b). In fact, the Facebook account of CGTN (formerly CCTVNEWS) has gained a large number of subscribers in the past few years. CGTN's digital media division attributed this rise in subscribers to its successful marketing strategies as well as hard work on running the account; for instance, in 2017, the Facebook account of CGTN posted a total of 12,922 times (around 35 posts per day on average) and was read 7.51 billion times by independent users, and the videos uploaded to its Facebook account have garnered around 640 million views.²

The more inclusive and open attitude towards China's political and social issues adopted by CGTN has brought about news coverage of many sensitive topics. For instance, during the 2017 'two sessions' (the plenary sessions of the National People's Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) period, CGTN covered many sensitive political and social issues such as vote-buying in Liaoning Province,³ 'have the NPC deputies ever voted 'no?',⁴ shortage of paediatricians and the second child dilemma,⁵ as well as endangered animals and environmental protection,⁶ amongst which many issues were uncovered by CGTN and had not yet been resolved. In addition, a series of news reports concerning the LGBT community have aroused heated discussion, including 'LGBT issues in China: Transgender man demands workplace justice, social equality',⁷ 'Chinese legislator calls for LGBT rights',⁸ 'Gay leap forward – A work in progress',⁹ 'Gay leap forward: An international love',¹⁰ etc. During the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's return in July 2017, instead of dodging the fact that someone had put a black cloth over the Bauhinia sculpture on Golden Bauhinia Square – a symbol of Hong Kong's return to China – CGTN-English reported it.¹¹ Such reports can be seen as an endeavour to present a true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view of China, which is one of the new missions of Chinese international communication.

Another new mission of Chinese international communication is to promote the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind. In December 2017, the CGTN Global Media Summit and the Seventh Global Video Media Forum were held in the city of Sanya, China. Representatives totalling 387 from around 100 media organisations (including CGTN, Reuters, AP, RT, Al Jazeera, etc.) and 45 countries and regions, attended the summit discussing topics such as media convergence and the role of new technologies in innovating media dissemination. The theme of the summit was 'A shared future', which was described by the

CGTN Controller Jiang (2017b) as their commitment and desire. Accordingly, CGTN has provided a platform for a variety of voices and perspectives to be presented. For instance, CGTN did a series of in-depth reports on the famine and drought issues in Africa. But they also presented a dynamic Africa, through reports such as 'East Africa's telecom experts discuss boosting internet access',¹² 'South Africa launches first privately owned Nano satellite',¹³ as well as '2017 NBA Africa Game: A journey of "multi-wins"?',¹⁴ etc. Such reports contrast with the stereotypical view of Africa, characterized by disease, recession and disaster, which is presumably perpetuated by a history of distorted reporting of Africa by dominant Western media (e.g. Hawk, 1992; Keane, 2004; Bunce, 2015); though more recently major international broadcasters, such as BBC, also have had African reporters telling African stories (e.g. Marsh, 2016).

Conclusion and discussion

Based on the above analyses of CGTN's performance, we can see that CGTN has been trying to establish itself as a credible and globally recognised responsible media organisation and to become an alternative news source to major Western news outlets.

Some may be sceptical about this, as CGTN was launched by CCTV, which is 'by definition a state-owned media organisation of China' (Hu, Ji & Gong, 2018, p.77) and thus is considered by many Westerners as 'the propaganda arm of the Chinese party-state' (e.g. Flew, 2017). However, similar to the African countries which have experienced a history of distorted reporting by dominant Western media (e.g. Hawk, 1992; Keane, 2004; Bunce, 2015), China needs a media organisation to tell its own stories so that the world can get to know 'the true' China and understand it better. In addition, China has entered a new era, and is working to promote the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. As President Xi Jinping said at the 19th CPC National Congress,¹⁵ 'We will pursue open, innovative, and inclusive development that benefits everyone; boost cross-cultural exchanges characterized by harmony within diversity, inclusiveness, and mutual learning; and cultivate ecosystems based on respect for nature and green development'. Accordingly, the new missions of Chinese international communication, reflected in the activities of CGTN, include (1) to present a true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view of China by adopting a more open and inclusive attitude, and (2) to promote the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind by providing a platform for a variety of voices and perspectives.

As China is becoming more and more open and is working to make greater contributions to mankind, the possibility does exist for CGTN to become a credible media organisation in the eyes of the world and to let people 'see the difference' – as long as people around the world keep an open mind, and are ready to see a China and a world that are not the same as presented in their conventional viewpoints. After all, differences can't be seen with the eyes closed.

Notes

¹ Original Chinese: 同样的世界，不一样的报道；同样的报道，不一样的观点。

² Authors' personal interview with CGTN's digital media division.

³ 'Two Sessions: China's Liaoning recovering from vote-buying scandal', uploaded Mar 4 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NULzrO0uo8>.

⁴ 'The rise of dissent: Changes come to the NPC, China's lawmaking body', uploaded Mar 9 2017, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CDE_13VWV8.

⁵ 'Two-child policy creates need for more paediatricians in China', uploaded Mar 11 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbJ9--EoOXE>.

- ⁶ 'China to relocate 22 endangered finless porpoises in 2017', uploaded Mar 28 2017, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_f0te2qVO8.
- ⁷ Uploaded Feb 17 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cecMTzz4Lks>.
- ⁸ Uploaded Mar 13 2017, available at: https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d55544e346b6a4d/share_p.html?t=1489417571067.
- ⁹ Uploaded Nov 29 2017, available at: https://news.cgtn.com/news/3145544f79637a6333566d54/share_p.html.
- ¹⁰ Uploaded Dec 6 2017, available at https://news.cgtn.com/news/31557a4d30637a6333566d54/share_p.html.
- ¹¹ 'Hong Kong anniversary: Protest launched amid celebration events', uploaded Jun 26 2017, available at https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d59444f3351444e/share_p.html.
- ¹² Uploaded May 28 2017, available at https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d557a4e3041444e/share_p.html.
- ¹³ Uploaded Jun 10 2017, available at https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d4d544d7a49444e/share_p.html.
- ¹⁴ Uploaded Aug 5 2017, available at https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d55544d7a45544e/share_p.html.
- ¹⁵ Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress, available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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