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**WORK IN PROGRESS**  
**BLURRING AND**  
**POLARIZATION**

**A JWT TRENDLETTER AUGUST 2007**

**E**verywhere you look in key areas of life, you'll see old boundaries becoming blurred:

- Who's buying the moisturizer, and who's driving the pickup? Gender roles and behavior have blurred. Women are going further in education and their careers, and are doing more traditionally male things, while men are getting more "touchy-feely" and entering more traditionally female territory.
- Where's the office? Work time and personal time have blurred. With the rise of the information economy, the Internet and mobile telephony, people take their work home and also attend to personal business at work (paying household bills, messaging or e-mailing family and friends, etc.).
- Is that guy the older brother, the father or the grandfather? Generations are blurring. Children are getting older at a younger age, but at the same time, young adults are studying longer and living with their parents well into adulthood, and they are marrying and having children later. Older generations are having first or second families into their 40s and beyond.
- I'm here, where are you? Notions of location are blurring, thanks to communication technology, globalization and immigration, which are all helping to make distance less relevant. The customer service rep you're talking to may be speaking from another town or another continent. Wherever a Web site is hosted, it always looks "local" on your screen. And with mobile phones, you may not know whether the other party is in the same building or a foreign country.

The blur factor is becoming increasingly prevalent in society, but in keeping with that ancient Chinese principle of yin-yang, so too is an opposite trend toward polarization.

Sometimes polarization stems from people feeling uneasy when too many boundaries are shifting or blurring; they lose their sense of what's what and where's where, and they feel the need to take a firm stand. Sometimes polarization is driven by factors beyond the control or even the awareness of individuals: politics, globalization, rapid technological development and so on. Whatever the reason behind it, polarization is clearly affecting the way people think and behave—which makes it important for marketers to factor into their thinking.

This issue of *Work In Progress* examines the dynamics of blurring and polarization, and looks at a few specific areas where these yin-yang factors are at work.

**POLAR(IZED)  
PAIRS IN  
MESSAGING**

It's part of human nature to think in terms of polar-opposite pairs: male-female, day-night, East-West, rich-poor, us-them. How many times have you heard someone say, "There are two kinds of people ..." and then proceed to seriously suggest that the world can be divided between authoritarians and libertarians, introverts and extroverts, cat lovers and dog lovers, etc.?

Over the last two decades, fundamentalism has become more commonplace. Whether it refers to religious belief or is used in a broader sense, by definition, fundamentalism involves seeing the world as being polarized between those who accept "the truth" and those who don't. It's a way of thinking that certainly appealed in simpler times and seems to appeal more than ever in these complex times; seeing things in terms of polar opposites helps to cut through the confusion and make life simpler.

Politicians know that simplicity plays a lot better than complexity. As President George W. Bush put it in regard to the War on Terror, "You are either with us or against us." In a hurried, information-overloaded world of multitasking, channel surfing and fragmented media, simple polarized ideas are the safest bet for sound bytes and elevator pitches. For punchy communication when attention is limited, simple polarized positions work best. But they tend not to work so well when practical, useful understanding is needed.

Certainly, polar opposites are the building blocks of more complex views. They're a favorite tool of advertising account planners and consultants who rely on the graphic system of Cartesian coordinates (two axes and four quadrants) for exercises such as market positioning. And the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality profiling system, widely used in the corporate world, involves combinations of just four polar pairs, which generate 16 personality types.

Maintaining simplicity takes real determination, because things get complicated after more than a few polar pairs—combining even a few quickly yields a complex picture in which boundaries are blurred. In marketing segmentation, for example, consider the simple polar opposites of male/female, married/single, above-average income/below-average income, college degree/no degree and technophile/technophobe. That's five polar pairs, which gives us multiple unique combinations. It doesn't take many more variables to become really complicated.

**GOOD, BAD  
OR BOTH?**

The yin of polarization and the yang of blurring are played out larger than life in the area of entertainment. Simple polar opposites have long been a staple of Hollywood, Bollywood and every other producer of mainstream entertainment that aims for big box office. There are heroes and there are villains, good guys and bad guys, cops and robbers.

Over the years, of course, the embodiments of good and evil have changed to reflect the prevailing mythologies and preoccupations of the times. The bad guys have been Indians, Western outlaws, World War II-era Germans and/or Japanese, Soviet Communists, Arab terrorists, terrorists of all stripes. The good-evil dichotomy provides the foundation for superhero movies like *Batman* and *Superman*. Most recently, Harry Potter and his friends battled the forces of Voldemort, and the Fellowship of the Ring went up against Mordor and its evil minions.

As popular as these stories are, the good-evil formula runs the risk of being too simplistic to keep audiences interested beyond a single feature movie. When good is only good and bad is only bad, there's less scope for drama and intrigue. The sprawling saga of *Star Wars*, with its struggle of the Alliance against the Empire, contains the shock revelation that good (Luke Skywalker) is intimately related to evil (Darth Vader). Similarly, Harry Potter struggles with the insight that he has the potential to be a villain.

Many long-format dramas have turned their back on polarized heroes and villains, aiming for greater complexity and more blurring between good and bad. In Fox's runaway global hit series *24*, there's no doubting that lead character Jack Bauer is doing whatever he needs to do to protect Americans from terrorists—and that includes some morally dubious tactics (e.g., torture and other illegal actions). The series frequently has its "heroes" face dilemmas where even the "good" choice is tainted.

Today's consumers may not have the patience to pay more than a sound bite's worth of attention to politicians and advertisers, but they seem to appreciate complex plot lines where the poles flip. In shows that run over many weeks or several seasons, polarized simplicity often proves too flat; instead, good and bad are blurred. For example, is Tony Soprano a good guy who does some bad things or a bad guy who does some good things?

So do audiences want to be entertained by polarized simplicity or blurred complexity? The key factor seems to be the amount of time and/or attention they are willing to spend. The more long-running and engaging the story is, the more it can (and perhaps must) develop blurred complexity.

## **THE SINKING MIDDLE GROUND**

In cities and towns all over Europe and North America, one can readily see a striking example of polarization. On one end of the spectrum are women (mostly young and secular-minded) who have adopted the prevailing fashion of low-cut tops, low-rise jeans and ultra-short skirts and dresses. It's not unusual to see women unabashedly revealing their thong underwear and a few inches of posterior. On the other end of the spectrum are women (many of them Muslim) who cover their head and much of their bodies—in some cases, even their face.

Both of these phenomena are relatively recent trends. “Flash the flesh” styles have evolved over the years as young people have looked for ways to differentiate themselves from older generations. The Islamic movement toward covering up is clearly a counter-trend to the perceived immorality of the West.

For several decades, women in many Muslim-majority countries increasingly adopted Western-style clothing as the tide of modernization and Westernization swept the world. The tide turned with the Iranian Islamic revolution in the late '70s, when a traditional-minded, conservative government took control. Iranian women were required to wear the chador or manteau, and since then, many Muslim women worldwide have been covering up. In some instances this is due to choice and often a desire to identify with other Muslim women around the world, and in some cases it's due to social pressure or government edict (in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan under the Taliban). The right of women to wear a headscarf in government and school buildings was recently a big issue in elections in Turkey, where the secular state forbids headscarves.

It's not only Islam that has women covering up. Christian groups in Western countries are also starting to emphasize modesty. One such faith-based program, Pure Fashion, “encourages teen girls to live, act and dress in accordance with their dignity as children of God,” as described on their Web site. Pure Fashion runs a model-training program and puts on fashion shows that conform to “modesty guidelines”: shirts that are not too tight or low-cut, pants that are not too form-fitting, etc.

The polarization in clothing styles is indicative of a larger polarization on the issue of sexual morality. At one extreme are permissive societies (or parts of societies) where women routinely show breast and butt cleavage, where sexually explicit material is available in mass media outlets, where homosexuality is accepted as normal and where whole categories of casual sex (“friends with benefits,” “swinging,” etc.) raise few eyebrows. At the other pole are strictly moralistic societies and communities that often explicitly reject permissive mores. The most extreme have reintroduced the moral sanctions of old, such as death for adultery or homosexual practices.

While Western societies are generally regarded as the most permissive, the United States has seen a wave of moral conservatism. The election of President George W. Bush was driven in part by Americans' reactions against Bill Clinton's sexual antics. Among other initiatives, the Bush administration has made its AIDS-combating program, PEDFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), conditional on beneficiaries' acceptance of strict moral conditions. For example, 30 percent of the money spent on preventing AIDS must be earmarked for discouraging premarital sex; government funds may not be spent on activities that advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution and sex trafficking, and aid can go only to organizations that explicitly oppose prostitution and sex trafficking.

Along with initiatives like Pure Fashion, the polarized high moral conviction of conservative Christian opinion in the U.S. is also evident in initiatives such as The Silver Ring Thing, a youth ministry that preaches sexual abstinence before marriage.

Just as moral fundamentalists are reacting against what they perceive as immorality, so others in turn are reacting against what they see as fundamentalism and extremism. Some people have adopted what has been described as an attitude of “militant tolerance,” meaning a vigorous promotion of tolerance. The term is used with pride by some and as a criticism by others.

Those who practice or admire militant tolerance regard it as a defense of the middle ground against extremism. As one blogger put it:

“[Radical extremism] needs science, skepticism, satire and subversion. It needs a militant tolerance, one that is determined to stamp out fanaticism wherever it may lie ... [and] exposure to a society where tolerance is de rigueur, where being a citizen of the world comes before all else—and where the people, sometimes within living memory, have seen the ultimate consequences of intolerance.”

In theory at least, tolerance moves in the blurred middle ground where relativism also lives; its advocates share a similar attitude of “different strokes for different folks” and would likely agree firmly with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s sentiment: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

Critics of militant tolerance, however, highlight the paradox that it can veer into extreme intolerance. And in some sense at least, it stands as the polar opposite of fundamentalism and extremism rather than occupying the middle ground between viewpoints. As a University of Richmond student newsletter observed in 2006: “At the mention of something so innocent as a Christmas party or even the prospect of a friendly gift exchange, the militant tolerance police come out in force, demanding rather intolerantly that we exhibit tolerance by not even mentioning Christmas.”

While the polarized positions are taken up by fundamentalists and militants, there’s plenty of scope in the blurred middle ground for everyone else—those who take “moderation in all things” as their guiding principle (or “whatever,” for those under 20).

## A CLOSER LOOK PURE NEW ZEALAND’S CULTURAL HAZE

When Ma’a Nonu took to the rugby field during a 2004 tour of Europe, commentators were at a loss for words. After all, Kiwis reasoned, such behavior might be OK for the likes of British soccer star David Beckham, but what exactly does one say when an All Black—a member of New Zealand’s national rugby team and the epitome of hardy Kiwi bloke-dom—is wearing eyeliner?

Then last year, Tana Umaga, captain of the Hurricanes team, hit a poorly behaved teammate over the head with a handbag in a bar—and the teammate cried. (The bag sold on an online auction site for the equivalent of about \$15,000.) It would appear that many aspects of the New Zealand male’s earthy spin on the stoic “stiff upper lip” personality are falling by the wayside.

Take the fact that for 42 years, two-thirds of calls to Lifeline, a free counseling service, came from women, noted *The New Zealand Herald* in April. But in the six months prior to the article, half the calls had come from men, due at least in part to a highly publicized ad featuring a former All Black.

Gender blurring has meant that more dads are becoming full-time fathers.

And a 2003 survey by the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust found that 80 percent of fathers feel strongly that they'd like to spend more time with their family. A 2007 survey by management research company UMR Research reported that a solid majority (62 percent) of all New Zealanders believe that sharing household chores is vital to maintaining a healthy marriage—just five percentage points behind the number who cited a good sexual relationship.

In some ways, New Zealand politics have served as a breeding ground for gender blurring: New Zealand women were the first in the world to vote, in 1893. And in 1999, Georgina Beyer became the first transgender person to be elected to any parliament in the world.

Politics itself is blurred in New Zealand. The two main parties, National (right) and Labour (left), occupy such similar ground that National Leader John Key went so far as to praise Prime Minister Helen Clark's handling of the recent

coup in Fiji and termed the parties' foreign policy differences as "thin as a cigarette paper."

Despite the blurring that is happening along political and ideological lines, New Zealand is essentially a polarized country, where the Pakeha (people of European descent) are the majority and the indigenous Maori are a minority. These two segments of society are polarized by their access to resources: The Department of Labour notes that Maori men earn only 60 percent of an average New Zealand male's earnings and Maori women earn 74 percent of an average female's earnings. And Maori don't live as long as their Pakeha compatriots. The *New Zealand Listener* reports that Maori born in 1980 have a life expectancy of 65 years, compared with 71 for Pakeha citizens. That expectancy gap may be closing—the Statistics Department reported that it was "reduced by 0.6 years in the five years to 2000-02," but as the *Listener*

dryly put it, "at that rate, it will only take Maori 100 years to catch up."

New Zealand might be thought of as an adolescent country: exploring its identity, trying to find what fits best. It is itself a blur of cultures, from its British colonial and indigenous Maori heritage to its more recent Asian and Pacific Island influences, yet it must learn to deal with the polarization that inevitably results when groups have different access to resources.

Its cultural mix has resulted in a brand defined more by a handful of icons than a cohesive national identity. A survey by global market research company Anholt-GMI placed New Zealand 19th out of 25 nations in terms of culture. "That's the global perception. Sadly, it seems few Kiwi cultural icons loom large in the average English mind: it's still the All Blacks, sheep, the haka [a Maori dance], hobbits and a clean, green environment," observes the *Listener*. Still, that's not a bad platform to build on.

## **BIG TENT MEDIA vs. NICHE COMMUNICATIONS**

The media is a key player in the dynamics of blurring and polarization. It's from the media that consumers form perceptions of what's happening in the wider world. And in turn the media's version of the bigger picture strongly influences how consumers interpret their everyday personal experiences.

The media has always had the potential to polarize opinion—also known as reinforcing prejudice. With newspapers and magazines in particular, opinionated proprietors have long attracted readers who share their political and social views. Although many publications strive to maintain balance and diversity, others find that there's more mileage in highly opinionated coverage. It's no coincidence that extreme views are sometimes described as populist.

In the days of highly regulated broadcast media, TV and radio tended to be more moderate than print media. They aimed to appeal to a broad range of consumers. But broadcast media has become less regulated, and technology has enabled TV and radio channels to broadcast at a lower cost, making it more viable to target niche audiences. And now the Internet is a serious alternative-distribution



channel for print, radio and TV. (Indeed, online, the distinction between media types is blurred; they are all consumed through the same screen.)

The net effect is that the media environment is becoming increasingly fragmented. Niche media is able to serve what *Wired* editor Chris Anderson has dubbed “The Long Tail”—large numbers of small markets. In this environment, consumers can make the media choices that most closely match their particular preferences and can ignore whatever doesn’t align with their interests. And with time-shifting, on-demand media options, audiences are able to build their own wholly customized media menus.

One effect of this is that consumers don’t have to listen to opinions they don’t like. And the less consumers are exposed to “big tent” broad-opinion, consensus-forming mass media, the more likely they are to seek out only media that reflects their point of view. On an individual level, this has a polarizing effect: Conservatives avoid media with a perceived liberal bias; liberals avoid what they regard as right-wing media.

A new development in media is the growth of user-generated content, especially social networking sites. Places where users can blog, swap opinions and engage in debate have the potential to serve as consensus-building forums where polarized opinions are debated and more moderate opinions are formed. However, working against this is a phenomenon described as cyber-disinhibition by psychologist Daniel Goleman, author of *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Social Relationships*. Citing behaviors such as “flaming” and “cyber-bullying,” Goleman theorizes that people may be more apt to take extreme positions online than they are face-to-face. Positions and behavior become polarized more easily.

It’s too early to say whether the polarizing potential of the emerging mediascape will be counterbalanced by its fragmentation. What’s certain is that in a media environment of infinite choice, no consumer has to spend more than a few moments in the presence of opinions he or she dislikes, let alone consider those opinions seriously. On the other hand, it’s easier than ever for inquisitive types to find out what others are thinking and doing. And many people get a blurred blend of opinions and angles in one place via news aggregators (e.g., Google News). They may skip the headlines that don’t match their opinions, but they can’t help seeing them. Even that controversial news organization Al Jazeera is just a click away.

Paradoxically, while multi-channel media may make it easier for consumers to seek out polarized opinions, it also has the potential to blur people’s sense of boundaries. If “the medium is the message” and the medium (TV, radio, the Internet in particular) is delivering a mix of opinions and attitudes, then the message is blend and blur. Just how much blending and blurring is possible depends on the media owner. According to an Associated Press report, nearly 100 million households worldwide receive Al Jazeera’s English TV service, almost half as many as CNN. Since January 2007, the channel has been broadcasting



news to 550,000 Israeli homes on the country's largest cable provider, Yes TV. Yet in the U.S., no major cable or satellite provider carries the station.

Another aspect of media blurring is the distinction between professionally created and user-generated content. Many news organizations' Web sites have opened up to comments from the public; their journalists write blogs, just as millions of ordinary people do, and some (such as the BBC) routinely accept photos and video clips from members of the public. The Korean organization OhmyNews relies on "citizen journalists" to provide news reports, which are edited by a small staff of professional journalists.

Professional photographers who could previously earn a steady income by selling stock photos have found prices being driven down as myriad amateurs sell their images on sites such as istockphoto.com (now owned by Getty Images) for nominal fees. As *Wired* reported in a piece titled "The Rise of Crowdsourcing": "Technological advances in everything from product design software to digital video cameras are breaking down the cost barriers that once separated amateurs from professionals. Hobbyists, part-timers, and dabblers suddenly have a market for their efforts."

Regardless of the content of media, there's no doubt that digital convergence means a blurring of boundaries between media sources and media genres. Computers, digital media players such as iPods and many mobile phones blend music, voice, images, video, games, news, text messages and anything else that can be digitized.

The distribution of wealth and resources has become a lot more polarized.

In the decades after World War II, the gap between the wealthy and the poor in developed countries was relatively narrow. Then in the 1980s, along came the polarizing figures of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan; the character of Gordon Gekko from the movie *Wall Street* and his motto "Greed is good" came to symbolize the era. Soviet communism crumbled and then collapsed, and Chinese Communist leader Deng Xiaoping decided it was OK to make money. Since then, the world has become much more polarized between the very wealthy and the very poor, both between countries and within countries.

The more that high-profile CEOs, entrepreneurs and celebrities are associated with astronomical income, the starker the contrast with the many who are struggling to make ends meet. The gulf between the wealthy of the world and the poor has itself become a celebrity issue with global initiatives such as Make Poverty History.

As the polarization of wealth has become a major political issue, economists and policymakers have increasingly favored the Gini coefficient, a measure of

**THE POLARIZING  
OF THE CLASSES  
AND THE BLURRING  
OF THE ELITE**

income distribution in any defined group devised by Italian statistician and demographer Corrado Gini. There are two extremes on the scale: Complete equality, where income is shared equally among all households, results in a Gini coefficient of zero; complete inequality, where one household has all the income and the rest have none, gets a coefficient of 1.00. For example, Brazil, which has one of the widest income gaps in the world, scores a 0.54. (0.4 is regarded as the “danger” point, above which social unrest becomes likely.)

Among developed countries, the polarization of rich and poor has been making headlines in the most resolutely market-oriented economies of the U.S. and the U.K. But they’re far from alone. The rapid economic growth of China has opened a growing income gap that is officially acknowledged and monitored, with many concerned about the country’s Gini coefficient of 0.45. According to a January 2007 article on ChinaDaily.com.cn:

“The richest 10 percent of Chinese families now own more than 40 percent of all private assets, while the poorest 10 percent share less than two percent of the total wealth. ... According to a recent survey jointly conducted by the China Youth Daily and Sina.com.cn, nearly 90 percent of Chinese people are alarmed by the gap between the haves and the have-nots. About 80.7 percent said it was time to correct the imbalances, while only 14.1 percent believed there is no need to change.”

The social-democratic countries of northern Europe have traditionally aimed to minimize the polarizing gap between rich and poor, but even in egalitarian Sweden the gap has been expanding. As Statistics Sweden reported in 2006, an increase in household income “has been most apparent for high-income households and as a consequence, the spread in the distribution of income has increased.”

What is it about recent decades that has triggered this polarization of wealth? One factor has been the willingness of voters and governments to tolerate greater inequality. The booming Chinese economy would not have been possible under the enforced equality of the Mao era. The widening wealth gap in the U.K. under the self-styled New Labour government might not have been possible under “Old Labour” (i.e., socialist) governments.

Another factor has been the rapid growth of new technologies, industries and services. The examples of Microsoft, Oracle and Google in the United States and Wipro and Infosys in India show how new technologies can generate vast fortunes very quickly. People lucky or smart enough to have the right skills and attitudes can get far ahead of the curve because their skills are typically in short supply and high demand. But by the same token, people with outmoded skills are left behind.

Globalization has also played a role. When corporations or service providers in developed country A can source manufactured products or services in low-cost country B, that tends to depress employment and/or wages among manufacturing and services workers in country A and stimulate employment and income in country B. That in itself creates polarizations of wealth within

countries. In India the poles stretch between the educated workers of switched-on cities such as Bangalore and the scores of illiterate rural poor; in China the gap is between the increasingly prosperous coastal cities and the hundreds of millions of poor in the rural hinterland.

While the gap between rich and poor is polarizing, from another perspective it has a blurring effect. The increasing prosperity of million in countries such as Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRIC countries) and Eastern Europe is closing the gap with the world's developed countries. In terms of purchasing power parity (exchange rate adjusted for local costs) and hence relative standard of living, the prosperous millions of BRIC and other emerging economies are better off than many in the more wealthy countries of the West.

Inexorably, as prosperity in these emerging economies increases, the divide between the poor of the rich countries and the rich of the poor countries blurs. The combination of powerful interactive technologies and trade liberalization matches high-cost demand and low-cost supply, and over time the cost gap narrows.

## WHAT IT MEANS

In some cases it's important to identify the simple polarization that can help cut through complexity and focus attention on crucial factors—although that can also give the misleading impression that other factors don't count. In other cases, building a complex, blurred picture stands a better chance of representing the many facets of reality—but it can also lead to information overload.

In truly yin-yang fashion, getting a working understanding of people, markets or other complex phenomena requires both simple polarization and complex blurring. Both have their place.

For mass marketers and the media, it's quite often a case of appealing to the mainstream (blur) versus a niche (polarization). As the world becomes more complex, with blurring and polarization at play simultaneously, increasingly it's about finding balance between the two: pairing a mass message (one that does not alienate important consumer segments on the fringes) with an array of niche ones (so long as they do not push away the core).

It's a retail banking brand layering in messaging for its Sharia-compliant products and services over its mass marketing campaign—a nod to the

increasing importance of the 1 billion-strong global Muslim population. Or Harley Davidson USA (traditionally marketed primarily to male baby boomers) creating brightly colored gear to appeal to the growing population of female riders—a response to the gender blur that’s prevalent in the U.S. today. Ideally, all of these communications, products and services can coexist peacefully without diluting or obscuring what the brand stands for.

It’s a tricky balance—marketers cannot be everything to everyone. At the same time, they cannot ignore growing consumer segments that may live on the edges now but could evolve into a significant niche or eventually meld into the mainstream.



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