

# Binary Thinking

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## Yes or No?

On or Off?

Right or Wrong?

Black or White?

Leave or Remain?

TV or Digital?

All simple, binary choices right?

Binary thinking is comforting. It helps us create a mental model of a world in which things are simple, straightforward, easy to discern. Our brains love the idea that this is how the world works. It's reassuring and requires less cognitive effort.

But this really isn't how the world works. Binary thinking might have been useful when we were out on the savannah deciding whether to run to the nearest tree or not when we saw a flash of large feline teeth but in an increasingly complex world reducing decisions to simple, binary choices is fraught with danger.

Take Brexit, for example – our complex, intertwined relationship with the EU reduced to a simple yes/no question on a ballot paper. Emotions have, and will continue to, run high as this simplification runs headlong into the complexity of the Brexit negotiations. Imagine the outcome had our politicians been more honest, with themselves as much as with the nation, about this complexity to begin with.

Anyone who thinks they have simple answers to questions about fundamentally unknowable, complex future possibilities is kidding themselves and hampering their ability to deal with the unexpected in an agile way – binary thinking encourages us towards zero-sum arguments where only one outcome can be “right”, or represent “winning”. Rather, the most successful outcomes derive from a more nuanced understanding of the world, one that accepts there are shades of grey and looks at problems with a more open mind.

This is true in media as much as in the real world. Witness the zero sum thinking that leads to ridiculous statements such as “TV is dead” promoting vast budget switches to unproven media while TV continues to dominate media effectiveness.

Stop the quest for definitive, binary answers to complex questions. The best we can hope for is to make decisions that are, on balance, probably mostly right based on the incomplete information we have access to.

Embrace the grey area, be comfortable in not knowing while maintaining an unquenchable thirst for insights that might help illuminate the future path and you will make better

decisions.

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