

Current - Gurevitch eds  
Mass Media + Society, 2nd ed.  
London: Edward Arnold, 1996

# The Globalization of Electronic Journalism

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## Introduction

The notion of globalization has become one of the more common, rather overused buzzword of our times. Often accurately, sometimes hyperbolically, all manner of events, processes, products and ideas, from political and military conflicts, to industrial production, to consumer products, to culture, are endowed with a global embrace. Yet perhaps in no other field has globalization become so visible as in the areas of culture and mass communication. Every television viewer witnesses the process every day.

Overuse of a concept leads, inevitably, to its trivialization. Much of the discussion of the globalization of the media, both in the media themselves and often also in the academic literature, is either platitudinous, repetitive, or soaked in the aura of 'high tech'. The great 'media events' of our time, such as the live broadcasting of the landing on the moon, or of the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle, or of sports events such as the Olympic games, are invoked to illustrate and dramatize the marvels of the new technologies. Less attention is paid to questions concerning the social, cultural, economic and political antecedents and consequences of this 'communication revolution'. A 'blue Skies' psychology seems to permeate the discussion, nurturing the notion of a communication 'revolution' that will bring people and nations together, shrink our world and turn it into McLuhan's prophesied 'global village'. It is a perspective based on the implicit assumption that 'communication is a good thing', that tensions and conflicts stem from 'breakdowns in communication', and that if we could only have 'better communication' a more harmonious global order will come about.

To be sure, the other side of that coin has also been argued forcefully. The seemingly boundless optimism about the potential promises expected to emerge from the 'communication revolution' has been countered by various critics. Some (e.g. Ferguson, 1992) challenged the very mythology that has been generated around the concept of globalization. Others raised two related objections. First, they saw in an unbridled tide of global communication

genuine threats to the autonomy and the viability of the cultures of weaker and more dependent societies, primarily indigenous Third World cultures, or even to the cultures of some First World societies, whose 'authenticity' and uniqueness were seen as perilously vulnerable to the products of Hollywood and US television. (Note, for example, debates concerning European Union policies designed to create 'a trade barrier to limit American entertainment imports - in the name of national cultural "preservation"' (Smith, 1990a). Second, questions were raised about the economic, political and ideological interests being served by an unlimited and 'free' flow of communication. Were these, the critics asked, indeed 'technologies of freedom' (in the phrase of Ithiel Pool, 1983), or did they actually threaten to undermine the capacity of weaker countries to structure their national media systems, and to formulate their own national communication policies according to their own interests?

The challenge for students of the processes of media globalization is to 'get a conceptual grip, beyond the language of gee-whizzery, on an escalating, yet formless, sprawling and globe-shaking process that may be impinging on people's senses of their places in the world and on the power of regimes to effect their wills within it' (Blumler, 1989). In this chapter we do not intend to confront the comprehensive challenge presented in this statement and, rather than dealing with arguments which, for the most part, date back to the heyday of the debate about 'media imperialism' in the 1970s, we shall explore one specific aspect of that process, namely the ramifications of the globalization of television news. Structurally, we shall argue, the globalization of television news has consequences for the shifting balance of relationships of dependency in a number of areas: between nationally dominant and subordinate national media systems; between media institutions and political institutions; between national and 'local' television news services; and between television news professionals as encoders of meanings and audience members as decoders. At the level of the audience the process of globalization facilitates a comparative examination of issues in the reception of news, examined cross-culturally.

By way of setting the scene we begin with a background discussion of the issue of globalization. Next we examine the institutional structures comprising the global system, looking specifically at the European Broadcasting Union's news exchange system as a specific case, followed by a discussion of some of the implications of the process for the different roles of television, and the shifts in the relations of dependency these entail. We conclude by considering some of the problems involved in a comparative analysis of the reception of news.

## Globalization

For students of the media, interest in the globalization process lies in its happy mixture of technology, issues of information flow, and questions of audience comprehension and reception of that information. But the concept is equally pervasive in many other domains of the late twentieth-century world. It is difficult to think of an area to which this concept has not been applied. The list

seems to be endless: from the mantras of free trade and the globalization of capital, to globally shared 'media events' and tales of global celebrities.

Globalization is more than a recurring theme in common cultural consciousness. Its easy lodging in everyday discourse is mirrored in contemporary social theory and political analysis and is invoked in many and varied ways by many and varied people. Politicians, journalists and western economists deploy it to describe a worldwide interdependent political and economic system framed in the language of the connectedness of markets, with an explicit emphasis on the economic determinants of that system. Globalization is seen as a technologically determined, institutionally created set of relations that has altered traditional models of economic operation. Lying not far behind this use of globalization is the older discourse of development and of global integration. It is a throwback to an older model of uniform, international model of growth with western economies as the reference group. The difference lies in the fact that development is now seen not as linear (i.e. all countries need to develop towards this ideal) but rather as an interdependent process. Economic interdependence spells interconnected growth - imbalanced in part or at different stages - but eventually arriving at the same end.

However, the ideal of globalization has, of course, a longer history. Liberal thought saw humanity progressing as modernization eroded localism and created huge societies whose flexibility and inclusiveness presaged the dissolution of all boundaries and other divisive categories (Smith, 1990b). This notion of globalization has been viewed sceptically by other commentators (especially those on the left) and political economy theorists who drew on neo-marxist formulations. Critics of globalization equated it with a set of distorted relations - economically, politically and socially - that reiterated historical imperialism and perpetuated postcolonial inequalities.

More than thirty years after its initial appearance, McLuhan's (1964) coined slogan of the 'global village' remains the sacred chant for a large number of pundits of globalization. Instead of the sound bite, here is the entire passage:

After a thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. As electronically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. (1964, pp. 11-12)

Thus, and in spite of the torrents of scepticism that followed, was set up the frame of reference for much of the discussion about media globalization in the past three decades. The debate may be described as a succession of frames or paradigms. They have been labelled 'communications and development', 'cultural imperialism' and the currently revisionist 'cultural pluralism', still searching for a theoretical shape (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1992).

Whatever the differences between these approaches, all see the role of communication and mass media as crucial elements in the process of globalization. The differences are as much conceptual as they are historically located. 'Communication and development' emerged out of developmentalist

thinking in the early 1960s. Faced with the economic poverty of Third World countries following the Second World War, western academics debated the nature of 'development' and the obstacles therein. Some arguments focused on the lack of capital for investment, others on the lack of education and entrepreneurial vision. Lerner (1958) and Schramm (1964) argued that the problem lay with traditional and conservative world views or mentalities that could be removed or circumvented through the use of the mass media, which would bring about change in values and attitudes. This perspective has been criticized (and increasingly strawmanned) for its ethnocentrism, its a-historicity, its linearity and its conception of development in an evolutionary, endogenist fashion (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1991).

Much of that criticism has come from 'dependency' or 'media imperialism' theorists who have characterized the nature of the 'global embrace' as less than cuddlesome. The critique centred around the idea that the conditions of postcolonialism were not very different from those of colonialism, only subtler. The economic, political and cultural relationships between the First and Third Worlds are characterized less by direct economic or political control and more by dependency, whereby the Third World is dependent for economic, political, and cultural resources on the First World which, through a continuation of colonialist logic and action, has created such patterns of dependency. The media are seen as part of the institutional apparatus that creates such dependencies by providing western-produced packages of information and entertainment that carry and transmit western cultural values. Development through media contents and policies is part of the process of cultural hegemony.

The development of revisionist cultural theory can be traced from Horkheimer and Adorno's (1972) criticism of the 'culture industry' in the 1940s to the more pragmatic concept of the 'knowledge industry' in 1965, to the appearance of the terms 'consciousness industry' in 1968 and the 'information industry' in 1970. Currently, the cultural pluralist or revisionist position is strongly underwritten by a postmodernist vision of globality. The approach's strength, however, derives from its emphasis on the complex nature of processes of cultural production, distribution and consumption and its insistence that understanding the process should not be sought in any single part of the process but in its entirety.

Both the developmental and the media imperialist formulations (especially in their classic formulations) saw the role of the media as essentially developing/enlarging traditional modes of community, either by incorporating new cultural elements or by arriving at global, albeit imbalanced, cultural forms. In the developmental approach, the media were agents of both nation-building and of enlarging that nation into a union of nations - politically, culturally or economically conceived. In the latter, the media were seen as creating connections that resulted in undermining the cultural integrity and coherence of nation-states. The cultural revisionist view draws on postmodernist ideas to efface ideas of locality (such as nation-state) and argue for the emergence of global, cosmopolitan and transnational cultures.

Where does television news fit into this panoply of ideas and formulations? The picture is somewhat fragmented. Some studies have dealt in piecemeal fashion with television news production and distribution, especially news flow

and news content. The history of this research stretches back to the systematic analysis of the flow of international news conducted by Wilbur Schramm over three decades ago – a fact conveniently forgotten by more recent critical scholars who note only his 'developmentalist' orientation. Schramm (1964) claimed that the:

... flow of news among nations is thin, that it is unbalanced, with heavy coverage of a few highly developed countries and light coverage of many less developed nations, and that, in some cases it tends to ignore important events and distort the reality it represents.

Other students of international communication followed on Schramm's critical understanding of international news flow. Hester (1973) argued for a range of variables to explain the volume and direction of international news flow, including 'power hierarchies', 'economic affinities' and the rank order of nations. Galtung and Ruge (1965) added variables such as socio-cultural proximity, wealth of nations, saliency of elite nations and people and negativity of events.

There is, then, a connection between this earlier work and the bulk of work on news flow which draws on dependency/media imperialism theory. Much of that work is linked to issues of news flows articulated in political forums such as the non-aligned movement and UNESCO and to the debate on the 'New world information order' (NWIO) in the 1970s and 1980s. A range of critical writing has informed this debate, such as the work of Schiller (1969; 1976; 1984), Hamelink (1980; 1983), Garnham (1985), Mowlana (1985) and Mattelart (1983), who have pointed to issues of institutional practice, political culture, cultural imports and most significantly global capitalist expansion.

Some of the work referred to above focuses methodologically on content analysis, seeking to reveal the presence (or absence) of textual elements, but not their cultural orientation or their ideological import. The search for that missing element – a formulation of the cultural function (and politics) of news – has been attempted in a limited number of comparative studies that examine not only the global frameworks of news stories but also, and most importantly, their reception by the audiences for news in different countries. Hence the emergence of a comparative, cross-societal framework for the study of the globalization of television news. That perspective is informed by narrative/structural approaches that regard television news not as a limited set of content features but rather as a text, a social artefact, amenable to cultural decoding. Gurevitch et al. (1991) outlined the general parameters of such perspective:

News stories should be examined as related, in the same way as documented historical facts and incidents, to one or another myth or super-story or cultural theme, as these appear in different cultures. The meaning of a concrete news story is always produced in the public space of culture, and in the framework of a relevant family of stories, already familiar to the members of a society.

Understanding news as narrative allows for a first step towards an understanding of globalization in comparative and cultural terms. We shall return to that issue later on.

## The Institutional Structures

Claims concerning the globalization of the news media are not new or even recent (see, for example, Schramm, 1964, and Hachten, 1987). The printing press crossed national and cultural boundaries long before television. The international news agencies have been in the business of disseminating news materials around the world for almost a century and a half (Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Fenby, 1986). Radio and films were oblivious to national boundaries almost since their inception. Yet the advent of satellite technology, facilitating the instant transmission of visual materials around the world, can arguably be regarded as having ushered in a qualitatively new stage in the globalization of news.

Two reasons underlie this claim. First, it could be argued that the institutional arrangements for transmitting and exchanging television news materials, spawned by the availability of satellite technology, have transformed the institutional structures engaged in the global dissemination of news materials, toward a greater decentralization of the system. Second, the differences between the flexibility and degree of 'openness' of verbal versus visual texts (see, for example, Fiske, 1987) suggest that news exchanges based on the dissemination of visual materials must be qualitatively different from the transmission of verbal texts (as conducted, for example, by the global wire agencies).

The deployment of satellite technology for use in the global dissemination of television news has not only extended the reach, and increased the speed with which visual news materials are transmitted around the globe, but has also led to the setting up of new institutional arrangements dedicated to the international dissemination of television news materials. At least three branches of that system could be identified here.

- 1 The best known, at least by viewers around the world, are the International satellite-delivered news services, such as the US-based CNN, the British-based BBC Television World Service and BSKyB, and the Hong-Kong based STAR. These services provide fully shaped television news programmes via satellite. At this point in time CNN is the oldest and probably has the widest global reach, and therefore is the most familiar of these services. The situation on that front is quite fluid, however, and new services are quite likely to emerge in the future.
- 2 The international television news agencies are the outgrowths of the 'traditional' wire agencies. The 'big two' are Reuters (formerly Visnews) and WTN (Worldwide Television News). The first traces its origins to Reuters, and is now owned jointly by Reuters, the BBC and the American network NBC. The second originated as a joint operation of UPI (United Press International, now defunct) and ITN, the British Independent Television News. Both distribute television news materials around the clock to television news organizations around the world.
- 3 Systems of television news exchanges operate under the umbrellas of a number of regional broadcasting organizations, such as the European Broadcasting Union, the Asian Broadcasting Union, the Arab States Broadcasting Union and Intervision, serving the Eastern Bloc countries.

The organizations listed above, and the US television networks, are linked in a complex interlocked system of international distribution and exchange of television news materials.

### The International Television News Agencies

The international television news agencies, outgrowths of the global wire agencies, function along the same principles that guided their parent organizations (but replacing words with pictures) and play a central role in the globalization of electronic journalism. They provide news footage as well as complete stories to clients around the world, as well as to the regional news exchange systems. For example, the European news exchange organization, Eurovision, whose own story sources have for a long time been confined to its European member countries, looks to the agencies for the first coverage of big non-European stories; to topical hard news coverage from the Third World and other areas outside Europe, and to sports news, 'soft' stories and other off-beat stories that relieve the 'bulletin gloom factor' (Fenby, 1986). Stories offered by Eurovision's member stations are preferred to stories matched by the news agencies, but often the news agency story serves to reassure the news coordinators and news editors that the stories supplied by the member country is complete and accurate. A news agency story is often perceived as free from 'political motivation' and hence as more objective.

This faith in the news agencies' 'objectivity' is driven in part by the historical track record of the wire agencies, whose viability as purveyors of news stories over the last century and a half hinged on their scrupulously guarded impartiality, and in part by the assumption that pictures are more 'objective' than words. The agencies themselves reinforce this faith through the 'dope sheets' they produce to accompany and 'explain' the news footage they provide. These are written in a style that aims to be as 'neutral' as a descriptive narrative can possibly be, in order to be acceptable to a diverse range of news editors in different countries, and to alleviate the ideological sensitivities of news services in over 100 countries. The 'dope sheets' style avoids all potentially controversial terminology and adheres to a 'minimalist' language. The imperative to be non-judgemental extends even in extreme cases, as a (former) Visnews executive tells it:

If the PLO bomb a bus load of kids in Tel Aviv, VISNEWS would not describe that as an atrocity; we would not describe the PLO as terrorists, nor would we describe them as freedom fighters; nor would we, ourselves, refer to that specific event as a tragedy. We might well quote somebody else as saying it was a tragedy. The reason is quite simple. To many of our subscribers, the PLO blowing up a bus load of children anywhere might be a victory for the oppressed people of Palestine. There are no militants in VISNEWS; there are no freedom fighters. We have to choose this very precise middle path.

Ironically, 'objectivity' entails greater ease of manipulating the raw materials for different story-telling purposes. Indeed, it is easy to see how the 'raw' footage supplied by the agencies may be used for a variety of editorial purposes by television news editors around the world. Anecdotal evidence

of this was related by a member of WTN's bureau in Tel Aviv. During an especially cold winter spell in Europe a few years ago, a cameraman on the bureau's staff suggested a story that could appeal to freezing European television viewers. He went to Tel Aviv's waterfront and shot some footage of bathers splashing in the sea (thus, presumably instilling some hope that spring would come to Europe too). The footage was duly sent to WTN's headquarters in London, and from there was transmitted to WTN's clients. WTN's bureau chief in Tel Aviv, who regularly monitored the news on Jordanian Television, was surprised the following evening to see their footage on Jordan Television's news broadcast, illustrating a story about the decline of tourism to Israel. The pictures did, indeed, show a rather sparsely populated beach.

The risk of manipulation is not the only problem inherent in the emergence of global video wire services. As Powell (1990) puts it, if news editors around the world will start building their newscasts from universally available pool pictures, 'news coverage will have evolved into a video commodity, as anonymous and bland as any product on the future exchanges. And there is another hazard: very little foreign news footage is tagged and attributed to its source. Yet in most countries the originating agency is the government-run television network. Editors who would never approve stories filed by official propaganda writers may routinely approve the use of video shot and edited by government agencies.'

### The News Exchange System

While the television news agencies are coherent, centralized organizations, the news exchange system is a rather decentralized, loose grouping of regional news exchange organizations. Its decentralized character is reflected in the structure and operational mode of the European news exchange system.

The European news exchange system began its trial runs in 1958, and started its regular service in 1961. It grew from 21 active members in 1964 to 38 members in 1984. Ten years later, in 1994, active membership stood at 62 members (that number includes the members of the former Eastern Bloc news exchange organization, Intervision, who joined the system following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc). Thus, in spite of the explosive growth of global news services, the European system managed not only to find its niche in the global system, but indeed grow and thrive.

Internally, the European system, like the other regional news exchange organizations, is based on collaboration between its constituent national broadcasting services. Through a constant flow of telex messages and daily closed-circuit telephone conferences between specially designated 'news coordinators' and news liaison personnel based in the broadcasting organizations in different countries, an ongoing exchange of information is maintained about the availability of visual materials of news events (Lantenac, 1975). The news exchange services and agencies also provide the technical arrangements for receiving and sending news materials via satellite to those news organizations who expressed an interest in them.

In 1994 twenty national broadcasting services provided news coordinators for the daily exchange. The duties of the news coordinators are essentially those of 'gatekeeping', relating to the selection and choice of stories to be sent on the exchange system and determining questions of priority - both on selection of items and choice between different offerings on the same story. Perhaps the most sensitive part of their job involves attending to the needs and interests of all the different members services and selecting those stories that reflect supranational considerations. They are required to transcend their own national news interests and to adopt a cross-cultural, 'global' news perspective (Lantenac, 1975). In the words of one news coordinator, an employee of SRG (the Swedish broadcasting service):

When I am coordinating for Eurovision, I just forget SRG. I do my work on a Eurovision basis and if something comes up that SRG would have liked to have they have always the means of taking the unilateral (i.e. a one member feed) to get the material.

The requirement of serving a 'global' clientele is especially significant in the first satellite feed of the day (dubbed EVN-0), which contains stories chosen solely on the judgement of the news coordinator. Later feeds reflect the needs and wants of the different broadcasting organizations, as expressed during the editorial teleconference. Usually, when a story is 'bought' by three or more members it is incorporated into the satellite feed; but it is not uncommon for the news coordinator to continue to hold on to a story with an eye on future EVNs, even if there is no immediate demand for it.

Despite initial pessimism that the news coordinators would be 'biased' in their preselection, experience and analysis have shown that they conform to the general consensus: on over 90 out of 100 items, their choices would have been the same as the outcome of a general consultation (Lantenac, 1975). The similarity in news judgements reflects a remarkably high degree of shared news values in countries with highly varied political ideologies and perspectives on the functions of the media. These shared news values are reflected in the preference for hard news stories that are likely to be of interest to most, or all, members. They are the product of a shared news culture, based on mutual understanding and personal acquaintance amongst the small band of news coordinators, developed through their daily interaction (as well as the bi-annual face-to-face meetings of all news coordinators). More generally the shared news judgement is also based on a shared vision of the EBU. As one of the news coordinators put it: 'Any agenda that the EBU has is an agenda put to it by its members. . . . We are a service organization. The members decide if there is to be any agenda.' He also agreed that the news coordinator's role is not 'programmatic' but rather is one of a 'facilitator'.

### Some Institutional Implications

The relevance of the operations of the news exchange system for this discussion has to do not only with its contribution to the global flow of television news materials but also with its implications for the relationships

of dependency implied in the 'media imperialism' thesis, according to which western media institutions and interests dominated the global media system, and served as the back door for the reintroduction of western economic and cultural influences into Third World countries.

In the course of an observation study of the operations of the Eurovision News Exchange system, conducted in 1987, we were struck by the apparent 'give and take' that took place between the European 'news coordinator' and other regional news exchange organizations, primarily AsiaVision and Inter-Vision (now defunct). The exchanges we observed suggested that the relationship between the different regional organizations was becoming increasingly 'interactive' and hence, we deduced, mutually interdependent and therefore decentralized. An era in which two or three global news agencies dominated the flow of world news from bases in London, Paris or New York, and in which news stories had to be channelled to the 'centre' before being disseminated again outward toward the 'periphery', appeared to be gradually replaced by one in which Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur (the coordinating centres for AsiaVision) played a role more on par with the one played by the centres of the EBU news exchange system in the various European capitals.

However, data detailing the number of news items exchanged between the regional organizations portray a less rosy picture. In 1994, for example, the EBU's News Exchange transmitted over 22,000 stories. It received and transmitted no stories from SIN (the Madrid-based Servicio Ibero-Americano de Noticias, serving Latin American broadcasters); five stories from CaribVision, the exchange serving Barbados, Curacao, Jamaica and Trinidad; 110 stories (one half of 1 per cent of the total) from Arabvision, and 455 stories (about 2 per cent) from Astavision (Cohen et al., 1995). Thus while the exchanges between the regional organizations continue, the dependence of the European exchange on the others is barely noticeable.

Other evidence also raises doubts about the move toward parity within the global system. For example, the availability of CNN's transmissions around the globe and the gradual expansion of BBC Television World Service could be seen as evidence of the continued domination of global news coverage by western news organizations. CNN provides, inevitably, an American perspective on domestic (i.e. US) as well as 'foreign' (i.e. non-US) events. Its newscasts are, by definition, impervious to the process of domestication that characterizes the processing of news stories by editors working within the terminologies and meaning systems of their own societies. The same applies to the BBC World Service, notwithstanding its claim that it presents the news from 'nobody's' point of view. It should be noted, however, that these services are, and will continue to be regarded as *supplementary* services, unlikely to replace the primary, domestic news service in the countries in which they are available. Moreover, because the audience for them is necessarily confined to those with some command of the English language they are viewed by only a fraction of the audience in many countries. These factors mitigate to some extent the potential impact of their feared global reach.

## The Consequences of Global (Often Live) Television

Amongst the many consequences of the globalization of television news is the expansion of the range of roles that flow from television's omnipresence in world events and the instantaneous, often live transmission of these events to a global audience. The enhancement of the role of television inheres primarily in its emergence, in the era of instant global communication, as an *active participant in the events it purportedly 'covers'*. Television should no longer be regarded (if it ever was) as a mere observer and reporter of events. It is inextricably locked into these events, and has clearly become an integral part of the reality it reports.

The consequences of the intertwined relationship between television and the events it brings to the screen are especially significant in the case of 'live' coverage. This can be seen in the disjunctions it creates between *locality and globality* and between *television narrators and television viewers*.

The most obvious function of live television is its compression of space. Global media events, as Dayan and Katz (1992) point out, essentially present the same event to audiences worldwide. Perhaps the most memorable recent instance of this new genre is CNN's coverage of the Gulf War, viewed by audiences around the globe. While this was an ostensibly American production, its live quality gave it a universal dimension. CNN's viewers around the world could watch for hours on the 'opening night' of the war, as CNN's correspondents in Baghdad rushed from window to window in their hotel room, describing the bombardment of the city. In the days that followed, many hours of live coverage of the war turned viewers around the world into virtual eyewitnesses of the armed conflict, perhaps instinctively ducking with the reporter, as he described 'live' how scuds were flying over his head.

Live television, then, does a number of things. First, it presents reality as *self-revelatory*, i.e. it makes it appear as reality rather than as a construction. As Chatman (1981) puts it:

The implications of the camera eye style is that no one recounts the events, they are just revealed, as if some instrument – some cross between a video tape recorder and speech synthesizer – had recorded visually and then translated those visuals into the most neutral kind of language.

Live television also affects the narrative of television by being open-ended. It purports to lack a *perspective or point of view*. Unlike the usual television news product – over which journalists have almost total editorial control – little rhetorical manipulation is possible in 'live' coverage. The relationship between the event, the reporter and the audience is thus drastically changed. The audience is positioned inside the event, and the textualization that is usually the journalist's imperative is taken away, with potentially damaging consequences for the practice of journalism (see Katz, 1992). The event becomes an invitation to the audience to take part in the process of interpretation. There is little the reporter knows that the audience could not see for themselves, thus eliminating one of the key elements of the journalist's control over the narrative. The audience is left without the suspense built into narratives, except, of course, for the suspense of the unfolding event.

A related consequence of live broadcasting is the obliteration of the difference between the duration of the event and the time dimension in the narrative of the event. Time construction in the narrative and time as it unfolds are the same. Live broadcasting thus elongates time: the camera pans slowly over the skyline of Tel Aviv during a scud attack; Saddam Hussein lectures for an hour to British hostages in Baghdad. By structuring the narrative in these significant ways, live broadcasting renders television news open to audiences in different countries, and in doing so creates a media product that, while obviously culturally determined, has a significant universalistic dimension, making it possible for diverse audiences to move between the universalization of meanings and the cultural specificity of their own decodings.

## Television as Participant

The notion that television, and the media generally, are active participants in the world they report on, rather than observers of that world, raises a sensitive issue for media practitioners because it challenges one of the central tenets of western journalism, namely that in order to achieve objectivity, and through it truthfulness, journalists should detach themselves from the objects of their reporting, and maintain at all times a scrupulously neutral, impartial stance. To achieve this journalists attempt to position themselves 'outside' the events they report on. Only thus, they argue, can they perform their journalistic function properly.

In spite of the hallowed status of this position, however, this 'norm of apartness' is clearly flawed, both empirically and conceptually. Journalists can not extricate themselves from their societal context, either physically, socially or culturally, any more than other members of society can. They cannot, therefore, claim to – and hence should not pretend to – be able to observe the social world as if they were not part of it, as if from a position 'floating' above it. There is nothing new, of course, about this argument. Yet it is worth re-stating here because the rapid globalization of television news has established the participatory nature of television news as more crucial and fraught with consequences than ever before. This can be observed at a number of different levels.

### The International Level

The role now played by television in the conduct of international relations is merely an extension onto the international level of the actively participatory role that the media have always played in the lives of societies. But the dramatic expansion of the stage upon which television now performs this role – from a societal/national to a global one – has endowed it with a qualitatively new and sharper edge. This is especially the case in times of social and political turmoil, of rapid and revolutionary social change, or in periods of international crises. As discussed above, the capacity of television, utilizing satellite technology, to tell the story of an event *as it happens*,

simultaneously with its unfolding, can have direct consequences for the direction that the event might take. Some of the more memorable examples of this in recent years include the role played by global television in the student uprising in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1988; in the revolutionary events in eastern Europe in 1989 and, of course, in the Gulf War.

The presence of television cameras in these events affected the course they took in some significant ways, some more 'passive', others more 'active', as follows.

First, it created a global audience for events presumed to be of global interest or significance: revolutions, (e.g. the Chinese students' ill-fated demonstration in Tiananmen Square; the transformation, peaceful and otherwise, of the regimes of eastern Europe in the late 1980s and the early 1990s); wars (in the Persian Gulf and in the former Yugoslavia); human disasters (as in Rwanda and Somalia); dramatic scientific/political events, such as the landing on the moon; sports events like the Olympics, or 'human interest' stories. By transmitting these events 'live', and enabling instant global exposure, they transformed the city squares and other sites in which these events took place into a global stage. It is probably no exaggeration to say that 'the whole world is watching'.

Second, the consequent global publicity given to these events by 'live' television undoubtedly influenced the behaviour of the protagonists. Clearly, the publicity enjoyed by the demonstrating students in Tiananmen Square helped to sustain the demonstration and was probably taken into account by the authorities, perhaps first constraining their response and later hastening it. Large-scale publicity probably also acts as a mobilizer, leading the yet uninvolved to get involved. For example, the call for mass demonstrations in Wenceslas Square in Prague in 1989, publicized by television, was apparently responsible for recruiting even more demonstrators and, indeed, to engulf the whole society in the process of political change. The fall of the Berlin Wall in the glare of the television cameras endowed this event with an even greater symbolic value than it might have had, had it not been witnessed 'live' by countless millions around the world.

Third, global television can act as a 'go-between', a channel of communication between countries and leaders, especially when hostile relationships between governments tend to preclude direct contacts. One of the more celebrated examples of television's capacity to open up such channels of communication is the role imputed to US television in bringing about the visit of the Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, to Jerusalem. The news people who 'mediated' between the Egyptian President and the Israeli Prime Minister may or may not deserve credit for Sadat's trip, but at the very least they created a channel of communication where no other public one existed, and through which the opposing leaders appeared to communicate with each other almost directly.

A number of recent instances suggest that globalized television sometimes assumes not merely the role of a 'go-between' but may launch reportorial initiatives that tend to blur the distinction between the roles of reporters and diplomats. The Sadat-Begin 'dialogue' is one case in point. The same could be said about the Gulf crisis, during which the Iraqi leader and the American President communicated with each other via separate interviews

with television reporters. In the course of such interviews the interviewees sometimes slid, almost imperceptibly, into the roles of negotiators, exploring, with their interviewee, various possibilities for resolving the crisis.

Such 'extra-professional' behaviour raises questions and some criticism of the performance of television journalists. It has been argued, for example, that the scramble to secure the first interview with Saddam Hussein, born of the immense competitive pressures under which reporters and networks labour, offered the interviewee an opportunity to address a global audience directly, going 'above the heads' of other governments; that the reporters tended to become advocates for their own side, their own governments and its policies, and that consequently they usurped the role of the true professional advocates, the government's own representatives.

The role journalists sometimes play as go-betweens in international crises raises other questions concerning the very nature of the journalism they profess to practise. Their active involvement in the events they presumably 'cover' is often achieved at the cost of sacrificing some traditional journalistic norms, such as editorial control over which actors (and perspectives) to incorporate into the story and which to ignore. Reporters broadcasting from Iraq during the Gulf War were, of course, aware that they were being 'used' by their Iraqi hosts to present a view of the hostilities as seen through Iraqi eyes, yet were criticized by television viewers in the west for spreading Iraqi 'propaganda'. Likewise, in the wake of the American bombing of Tripoli in 1986, the Libyans assisted western television crews in filming civilian casualties, and naturally restricted access to military areas (Wallis and Baran, 1990). By facilitating the work of these journalists, both the Iraqis and the Libyans, ironically, 'assisted' the western news organizations to uphold the traditional journalistic norm of 'balance' - of showing 'the other side'. The motives impelling the journalists, however, stem, more likely, from competitive pressures than from adherence to the norm of 'balance'.

In addition to the hazards of control and manipulation that the media undergo in their new role as international political brokers, it is not entirely clear that the consequences of their interventions are always beneficial. For example, questions could be raised whether the failure of the diplomatic negotiations that preceded the Gulf War could be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that their intense coverage on global television made them part of a public, rather than diplomatic/secret discourse, which in turn meant that they were framed in political and ideological terms that left little room for dealing.

Fourth, global television assumes a significant role in the construction of world public opinion. As Blumler (1989) puts it:

The news media are not only a selectively-focusing and agenda setting force in international affairs. They are also a world-opinion defining agency. For at present, they virtually have a monopoly over the construction of world opinion, its agenda of prime concerns, and its main targets of praise and blame. At present, at least, what they tell us about what world opinion apparently holds on a certain matter can rarely be double-checked by international opinion poll results.

It should, of course, be noted that the role played by the media in the construction of world opinion is an extension, onto a global scale, of the

similar role they play in their own societies. However, whereas public opinion in a given society is typically tapped through surveys and polls (thus being a construct of the pollsters' work) *global* public opinion is, of course, wholly a media construction. In the absence of global polls or other similar 'hard' evidence, global public opinion is inevitably merely what the media say it is.

### *Inside the Television Industries*

Media systems around the world vary in many ways. The relationship between the press and broadcasting systems and the political system is governed, in every country, by the nature of its political system and the norms that characterize its political culture. The socio-political and the economic structures of different societies also determine the internal structure of their media systems, their modes of finance, and consequently the intra-system relationships between different media organizations. Thus, for example, truly reflecting its economic base, the American broadcasting system has always been regarded as a 'classic' example of a privately owned, commercially driven system, claiming autonomy from government or other political controls. Many European countries, on the other hand, had a 'mixed' media system, combining state-controlled or public-service media organizations side by side with privately owned commercial organizations. For many years these structures were fairly stable, exhibiting little propensity for change. The advent of the new communication technologies appears to have changed all that. Our concern here is limited to examining the impact of the introduction of satellite technology on the relationship between different television organizations.

The US experience is instructive in this regard. This is so partly because the American broadcasting system is the largest in the world, certainly in terms of the number of different television outlets, but especially because its specific structure, consisting of four national networks, with their affiliate local stations, a sizeable number of independent local stations, and a fully fledged cable television system. This structure constitutes a system of power dependencies, which turned out to be vulnerable to the potential impact of technological change.

For many years, television news, in the American context, by and large meant network news. The global news gathering machineries constructed by the networks' news organizations required resources above and beyond those available to any single station. As a result, local stations were always dependent on the networks' resources for any news materials which originated beyond their immediate home areas. News programmes produced by local stations reflected this dependency in the ways in which networks' originated materials were used in those (fairly infrequent) instances when foreign or other remote news stories were inserted into 'local' news shows.

Satellite technology has altered these dependencies. It enabled local stations to receive remote stories directly, often using their own sources. The resources required to send a reporter equipped with a satellite dish to a remote location where a major news story is unfolding have become bearable by single stations, especially when the prestige value of having one's own correspondent on the scene is considered. Thus, by extending the news reach

of local stations the same technology that contributed to the globalization of television news has, perhaps paradoxically, promoted developments in the opposite direction, namely increased decentralization of newsgathering.

The new status and prestige gained by local television news has also resulted in increased economic returns for local stations through steadily increased ratings. According to a 1985 study by Baran (quoted in Wallis and Baran, 1990), local television news in some stations accounts for 40-60 per cent of the stations' profits. These profits, in turn, allow the local stations to buy further national and foreign news footage. The position, and the market share, of large scale, centralized news organizations has thus been severely affected. For example, in 1994 the overall audience for network television news fell to an all-time low of slightly over 30 per cent of the total television audience. The proliferation of news outlets results not only in a fragmentation, and diminution, of the audience, but also in an increasing fragmentation of television news production.

While these developments are clearly evident in the commercialized and virtually deregulated American broadcasting arena, parallels can be found in Europe. 'Even in the European context of highly regulated broadcast media, many local lobbying groups are agitating for extended regional and local broadcast media' (Wallis and Baran, 1990). If extrapolated to the global scene, it could make smaller, less affluent television news organizations less dependent on the 'big boys' in the news business, and more capable of deploying the technology to serve their own needs. The technology might thus be a double-edged instrument.

### **Audience/Reception Research in a Global Context**

Issues of media consumption or reception are dealt with only tangentially in the globalization literature. Both the 'developmental' and the 'dependency' theorists assumed (in different ways) a dominance of western cultural products, but demonstrated little by way of actual, empirical evidence for this argument at the audience level. The difficulties are obvious. Besides the logistics involved in large-scale comparative audience studies, the methodological difficulties of tracking what happens at the decoding end of the process across a large number of countries loom very large. Nevertheless, some of the theoretical issues involved in the study of media reception in a global setting can be identified.

First, the notion of cultural variance constitutes one important link between the process of reception and issues of globalization. The idea is to look for different readings of the same or different stories across cultures, attempting to identify a range or matrix of global and local meanings. Much of the news materials disseminated globally, but especially the 'raw materials' disseminated through the regional news exchange systems and the television news agencies can be regarded as 'open' texts. 'Openness' implies the extent to which different texts constrain the meanings embedded in them or, alternatively, allow for multiple decodings of their meanings. In that sense verbal texts (e.g. news stories in the printed press) are relatively 'closed', that is, they

constrain the range of interpretations or meanings of the events they report, since any account of an event necessarily defines its meaning. On the other hand, 'pure' visuals (i.e. visuals unaccompanied by a verbal caption or text) are relatively 'open', as they are susceptible to a wider range of interpretations or 'stories'.

The visual materials that are the stock in trade of the news exchange organizations and the news agencies are, indeed, sent primarily in the form of 'raw materials', that is unedited footage, including only 'natural sound'. The task of editing and shaping these materials into news stories remains in the hands of news editors in the different broadcasting organizations. Thus, while the same visual materials might be used in different countries, the final shape of the stories they are telling, their narrative and thematic structures, and the meanings embedded in them remain in the hands of editors working with different national audiences in mind. In fact, such is the degree of 'openness' of the visuals that come down from the satellites that they could be regarded almost as 'an empty vessel'. (Barkin and Gurevitch, 1987).

This implies a shift away from questions of 'flow' or 'content' to concerns with 'meaning', the sense in which a text is framed and addresses its constituency - the local culture.

News stories should be examined as related, in the same way as documented historical facts and incidents, to one or another myth or super-story or cultural theme, as these appear in different cultures. The meaning of a concrete news story is always produced in the public space of culture, and in the framework of a relevant family of stories, already familiar to the members of a society. (Gurevitch et al., 1991)

The resulting diversity of meanings offers a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which television news construct different social realities. By comparing the similarities or differences in the meanings encoded into a variety of stories of the 'same' event, some insight may be gained of the degree of control that encoders have over the construction of meanings. Such comparative analysis may also offer an important antidote to 'naive universalism' - that is, to the assumption that events reported in the news carry their own meanings, and that the meanings embedded in news stories produced in one country can therefore be generalized to news stories told in other societies (Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990). A comparative study could then reveal the degrees of 'domestication' and/or 'universalization' embedded in the texts, as well as such patterns in decodings by audiences in different countries, depending on their specific social and cultural conventions.

A second issue involved in the conduct of comparative audience research is that of identifying the units of reception for global television news. At one level, the question, and the answer, seem fairly straightforward: the unit of reception is the audience that is exposed to, and receives, any specific news broadcast. Since most countries, societies or nation-states receive 'national' news broadcasts the audience for these becomes co-terminous with society or the nation-state. Society, or the nation becomes the 'interpretative community'.

Clearly, however, this formulation is problematic. Cultures and nations are not monolithic. They are fractured and are constituted by multiple cultural

groupings. If 'national' cultures are internally differentiated, does it make sense, then, to continue classifying audiences in such broad categories as 'German', 'French' or 'American'? The question is further complicated when we consider that nations and nationality are constructs (Anderson, 1991). Nationalist consciousness, the bedrock of the nation-state, argues Anderson, is a construct whose reality is contingent on the strength of belief in that construct.

A third issue has to do with questions of the 'balance of power' between those responsible for the production and shaping of media texts - the encoders - on the one hand, and members of the media audiences - the decoders - on the other. In presenting a view of the audience as active and autonomous, reception theory has brought about a shift in conceptions of the power of the audience.

How real is the 'autonomy of the audience' - its capacity to act as active producers of meanings - in regard to globally disseminated news materials? Since viewers of television news typically have no access to the more 'open' texts of raw visuals and are only exposed to already fully edited stories, their position as news consumers may not have changed from the one in which they were placed in the era of 'conventional' television news. It would therefore be plausible to assume that they may not have gained any greater autonomy vis a vis the story-tellers. In fact, it might be possible to argue that, faced with a larger amount of news stories from faraway places (for that is one of the changes that the global flow of news facilitates), their dependence on the encoders to make sense of these events actually increases. Presented with stories of events for which they have no ready-made 'schemas' (Graber, 1984), or frameworks for interpretation, viewers are less able to negotiate and construct the meanings of these events for themselves, and are inevitably more dependent on the perspectives embedded in the stories. Arguments about the 'empowerment of the audience' in the era of global television should therefore be taken with a grain of salt, at least until further evidence on this question becomes available.

We should note, at the same time, that this conclusion is based on a simple extrapolation of current theories of media-audience relationships, rather than on any evidence. However, if it were to be confirmed it might result in another swing of the theoretical pendulum, a retreat from the recent formulations of 'reception theory', back to the theories of powerful media and powerless audiences.

### Concluding Remarks

The process of globalization of electronic journalism is growing apace, transforming the flow of communication around the world and impacting in myriad ways on the ways people and societies know, perceive and understand each other and conduct relationships with each other. Perhaps paradoxically, however, the defining contours of the process are not easy to discern. The difficulties we confront in trying to grasp the nature and consequences of this process lie partly in the rapid development of the technology that facilitates it,

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the rapid emergence and change in the institutional structures that carry the globalization process forward, and the diverse ways in which the implications and the consequences of these developments manifest themselves. But the more significant obstacle, as suggested earlier, lies in the uncertainty about the most appropriate and theoretically productive way to conceptualize the process. In the absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework these diverse phenomena will remain unrelated, disconnected and more difficult to make sense of.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter we attempted to offer one starting point for the construction of such conceptual framework. Such a starting point, we suggested, could be found in the *shifting balance of relationships of dependency* between different participants in the networks of global communication. Each 'communication revolution', from the Gutenbergian to the electronic to the emergence of global, satellite-based communication, brought in its wake a transformation in the power relationships in society: the printing press contributed to undermining the power of the Papacy; the press facilitated the consolidation of the dominance of the middle classes in industrial societies; the electronic media, among other things, helped to legitimate counter-cultures and other stirrings against the existing social order. The globalization of television news may or may not be a 'revolution' on a par with these other historical revolutions. Nevertheless, the path to understanding it is similar.

## Notes

- 1 Portions of this chapter are based on work conducted with my former doctoral student, Anandam Philip Kavoori. His contribution is herewith gratefully acknowledged.
- 2 For a comprehensive study of the European News Exchange System, see Cohen et al., 1995.
- 3 A similar case in point is the Internet, the network of inter-computer communication that is now expanding at an explosive rate. In the absence of a coherent conceptual framework, questions about its 'democratizing' implications, its 'empowerment' of its users, or its contributions to the formation of 'electronic communities' continue to baffle many observers of this new phenomenon.

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