

Theoretical issues in the study of the globalization of television news

Michael Gurevitch and Anandam P. Kavoori
University of Maryland and University of Georgia

paper prepared for
"News of the World" Panel
APSA, New York, Sept 1. 1999

Introduction

This paper aims to sketch out some of the issues raised within the conceptual framework of two studies concerned with the globalization of television news, titled "The "global Newsroom" and the "News of the World", with special reference to the latter. The initial proposal for the "News of the world" project stated its purpose as "examining the interaction between citizens and nationally televised news programs in different cultural settings". Clearly, such broad scope allows for a variety of perspectives, with each participant bringing his or her own theoretical agenda. In this paper we shall map out some of the theoretical issues that concerned us in this project, without dealing either with the data set of the "News of the world" project, or with any specific questions regarding the countries/audiences in the project's data set. Rather we shall present the general matrix of issues involved in examining the phenomenon of the globalization of television news. Here we shall focus first on the meaning of "globalization" and then discuss the issue of "reception" in a global context.

Globalization

McLuhan's "global village" remains the sacred chant for a large number of pundits of globalization. For students of the media, interest in the globalization 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 late twentieth

century world. It is difficult to think of a domain to which these concept has not been applied. The list seems to be endless: from the mantras of free trade and the globalization of capital, to global wallowing in the fate of O.J. Simpson. The global beat goes on.

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, popular commentators and Western economists deploy it to describe an interdependent political and economic system framed in the language of market connectedness with an explicit emphasis on the economic determinants of globalization. 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 not seen as linear (i.e. all countries need to develop towards this ideal) but rather as an interdependent process. The central idea is that economic interdependence spells interconnected growth - imbalanced in part or at different stages - but all eventually arriving at the same end.

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, 1990, p.171). This notion of globalization has been viewed skeptically 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 post-colonial inequalities.

McLuhan's chant ("the global village") - a staple in discussions of media globalization - is rarely invoked in its entirety. Here to break (and keep) tradition 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 mountains of skepticism that followed, was set up the frame of reference for much of the discussion about media globalization in the last three decades.

Discussions of the globalization of the media went through three successive frames or paradigms. They have been labelled "communications and development," "cultural imperialism" and the currently revisionist "cultural pluralism" which is still searching for a theoretical shape (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1992, p.119).

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 1960's. 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 act as agents of change by bringing about a change in values and attitudes. This perspective has been criticized (and

increasingly strawmanned) for its ethnocentrism, its ahistoricity, its linearity and its conception of development in an evolutionary, endogenist fashion (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1992, p.120).

Much of that criticism has come from the dependency or media imperialist theorists who have characterized the nature of the "global embrace" as less than cuddlesome. While assault would be stretching the position, date rape does come to mind. The central idea is that the conditions of postcolonialism are not very different from colonialism, only subtler. In economic, political and cultural relationships between the First and Third Worlds, the relationships 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 a First-Third World relationships or, rather, dependencies, by providing western-produced information and entertainment and through them the transmission of Western cultural values. Development through media contents and policies is part of the process of cultural hegemony, resulting in media imperialism.

Revisionist cultural theory has drawn on ideas of cultural imperialism and numerous others in its development. One can trace its development from Adorno and Horkheimer's criticism of the "culture industry" in the 1940's, 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. Today, the cultural pluralist or revisionist position is strongly underwritten by a postmodernist vision of globality. The approach's strength however draws 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 became an agent of creating connections that resulted in undermining the cultural integrity and coherence of a nation-state. 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 international news flow done by Wilbur Schramm - a fact conveniently forgotten by more recent critical scholars who note only his developmentalist orientation. Schramm 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 (1964, p.65).

Following on Schramm's critical understanding of international news flow was the work of Hester, Ostgaard Galtung and Ruge. 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 the dependency related work is linked to news flows issues articulated in political forums such as the non-aligned movement, UNESCO and the resurgence associated with the debate on the "New world information order" (NWIO). A range of critical writing has informed this debate. Of primary importance is the work of Schiller (1969, 1976,1984) Hamelink (1980, 1983), Garnham (1985), Mowlana (1985) and Mattelart (1983). They have pointed to issues of institutional practice, political culture, cultural imports and most significantly global capitalist expansion.

Much of the work referred to above is limited by its methodological emphasis on content analysis, which reveals 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. These studies look not only at the global frameworks of news stories but also, and most importantly, at their local interpretation. Hence the significance of a comparative, cross-societal framework. In addition, such a perspective is informed by narrative/ structural approaches to television news. It sees news not as a limited set of content features but rather as a text, a social artifact, amenable to cultural decoding. Understanding news as narrative allows for a first step towards an understanding of globalization in comparative and cultural terms.

Central to arriving at such a formulation of the globalization of television news is a focus not on flow or on "content" but on "meaning," the sense in which a text is framed and addresses its constituency - the local culture. Gurevitch, Levy and Roeh (1991) outline the general parameters outlined in such a 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 (p.208).

The public space of culture that we refer to is the frame of reference within which television news as a cultural form operates. Audience research within the "reception analysis" tradition is also focused on the cultural context of audience interpretation. What needs to be identified is the parameters and dimensions of this public space. We turn to a brief discussion of this in the next section.

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. The difficulties are obvious. Besides the logistics of securing funding and establishing collaboration for such a comparative project, the methodological difficulties of tracking the decoding end of the reception spectrum across a large number of countries loom very large. (Tracking the encoding end -- supposedly a simpler task because it involves "only" a study of the broadcasters -- is difficult enough). In that sense, the current project is quite unique. The "News of the world" project addresses issues of reception on a scale that few other projects have. As Jensen points out in his outline paper:

Whereas media structures and the import/export of news produce the basic conditions of social awareness and participation; the audience, in understanding, processing, and applying the information, may be seen as a crucial link of the news flow....(Reception analysis) poses the question of how television may contribute to the social and political awareness and participation of the public in different cultural contexts (Jensen, project

proposal, page 3)

Overall, the project's focus as it relates to globalization fits within the cultural revisionist framework outlined above. Cultural revisionism draws heavily on the literature of cultural studies and critical theory. In that sense it has a great deal of theoretical history that can be used for a study of media reception in a global setting. A discussion of some of these issues follows.

(1) the notion of cultural variance is one way in which the issue of reception can be tied to 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. The "Global Newsroom" project conducted at the University of Maryland had such a focus. The project, which looked at issues of media globalization from the perspective of media institutions, content and audiences, focused on how news stories broadcast in different countries revealed different patterns of "domestication" and "universalization." The issue of polysemy, which Jensen identifies as one of the three axioms of reception deployed in the "News of the world" project also falls into the category of cultural variance. As he puts it:

Media messages are said to be characterized by openness or polysemy, leaving scope for several possible interpretations, which depend on the social and cultural conventions of the actual audience.

Polysemy, however, is a broader term than domestication or universalization, in that it comes from postmodernist analysis of television (and other) texts and refers primarily to alternate interpretations within a culture, rather than across cultures. The question of how to identify communities of interpretation or what has more commonly come to be identified as "interpretative communities", is an important area for the analysis of globalization. We now turn to a discussion of this issue.

(2) How do we begin to identify the units of reception for global television news? At one

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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.

Interpretative communities have traditionally been seen as constituted by lines of gender, ethnicity, age and language. But in studying news reception globally the tendency is to define the nation or society as 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 the work of, e.g. Benedict Anderson who reminds us that nations and nationality are constructs. Nationalist consciousness, the bedrock of the nation-state is, argues Anderson, is a construct; its reality is consistent with the strength of belief in that construct. In his words:

I propose the following definition of the nation: It is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion...The nation is imagined as limited, because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordered, hierarchical dynastic realm. Finally, it is imagined as a community because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship (1983, pp.15-16).

This lengthy quote from Anderson ties in the discussion of media reception and globalization to issues of modernity and postmodernity, to which we turn now.

(3) Anderson's idea points to the essentially semiotic nature of seemingly immanent political

categories. The nation-state is as real as is the power of the word that constitutes it and the people that rally around that word. The central force behind modernity, argue postmodernist theorists, was the hold that the idea of the nation-state had over people. As the anthropologist Michael Agar puts it, postmodernity has an altogether different flavor, compared with modernity and tradition. Both tradition and modernity had different constructs at the core of their belief systems - religion and monarchy in the former; science, the nation-state and democracy in the latter. While both periods differed vastly, they shared a sense of coherence and were constituted by an acceptance of such macro-narratives. With postmodernism, that cohesiveness breaks down and what results is a series of alternative narratives. Reality loses the coherence of the nation-state and dissolves into diverse constructs that draw sustenance from all over in that they are global.

Nation-states inherently imply a certain kind of comradeship ("deep and horizontal" for Anderson) and a similar sense of identity. Postmodernist arguments draw from the implications of Anderson's argument that once the coherence around a limited notion of identity (the nation-state) breaks down, then so does the adherence to that form of identity. Postmodernists see contemporary society as characterized by a diversity of coherences (gender, ethnicity, cosmopolitanism, age, language etc) rather than the totalizing characteristic of nationalism. Such a condition is made all the more possible by the effacement of locality in cultural forms and institutions - such as advertising, banking regulations, political discourse, television news or fashion (to name just a few). Globality assumes an effacement of modernist conventions and the arrival in cultural terms of a postmodernist norms. These norms are characterized by qualities of interpenetration, implosion and intertextuality. Interpenetration refers to the shifting sites of meaning and identity without any one dimension standing out; implosion refers to the fact that meaning about phenomena disappears as the basis on which they have traditionally been constructed (Baudrillard, 1983). Intertextual refers

to the "endless conversation between texts with no prospect of ever arriving at a point," (Bauman, 1990 p.427), thereby, further creating uncertainty in the way a discourse is constituted.

All of these have a single import for the discussion of globalization and media reception. Postmodernist perspectives see globalization in terms of the emergence of a common culture of consumption (Hannerz, 1992; Harvey, 1989) which paradoxically is contextless. It constitutes a globality by virtue of its irrelevance to spatial, political and cultural boundaries. Implicit in such a formulation is a model of globalization that acknowledges that trans-societal processes of cultural integration and disintegration lie outside the boundaries of the nation-state. Again, paradoxically, the postmodern model of globalization is both relativist and absolutist, allowing for cultural diversity in global unity (Featherstone, 1991; Ferguson, 1992).

All of these issues impinge upon how we decode audience readings of one media form - television news. We would argue for a multiplicity of theoretical concerns both culturally specific and transnational as the data set of the "News of the world" is examined. Jensen and Rosengren's analytic method of identifying "super themes" is a useful point of departure for such a analysis. As Jensen points out audience reception or

interpretation tends to be organized around certain general structuring principles, what is referred to as super themes or schemata. Seeing that the content of television news is often far removed from the everyday reality of most viewers they may rely on such generalized themes in order to bridge the gap between politics and the everyday. Super themes serve to further mediate between media and audiences (Jensen, Project proposal, page 4).

The comments offered here should be seen as initial sketches of the theoretical ground that needs to be covered before we can arrive at a framework for understanding global media reception.

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