

Global Journalism: Myth or Reality? In Search for a Theoretical Base

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We do not have much empirical evidence to support the vision of the global village in the sphere of mainstream mass media and classical journalism. The evidence that we have points into a different direction, the persistence of national or regional geo-linguistic media spheres. Media globalization is not a general phenomenon but a privilege of small global communication elites. We live a world of a globalization of two velocities: one very fast, of academic and other circles networking through the Internet or watching satellite TV. And one very slow, of the bulk of the people on earth, for whom the Internet is a local rather than a global medium and whose international media consumption is absolutely marginal.

My question today is: How “global” is the kind of journalism that those masses rely on in their national TV and print media? Let us confront some basic facts:¹

- By far the largest part of national or local news produced in any country on Earth never occurs in the foreign news of any other country. What we call “global news” is but a tip of the iceberg of all events and news produced daily around the world. National western press organs cover whole world regions with an average of 2-3 articles per day which is

¹ For an introduction into the debate on empirical data of foreign news making see: Hafez 2007, 24 ff.

inappropriate to capture the complexity of life of millions of people on earth.

- The situation of foreign coverage in regular national TV programs is even worse than in print. A number of studies point to a decline in foreign news output in big TV networks in Western countries like the US or Germany. Sweeping event coverage like 9/11 is rather an exception than the rule. The so-called era of globalization is not a time of increasing foreign news coverage but of decreasing interest in world affairs.
- Many countries hardly ever occur in the news of most other countries because they are not deemed news worthy. Our perception of the world is not only extremely limited in scope but also fragmented, we inhabitate news geographies with some “hot spots” and many “white spots”. Metropolitan vs. peripheral, regional versus global and North versus South gaps in international news are still operational. OECD plus G8 are world news – the rest is regional news at best.
- The bulk of foreign news coverage is purely political, with much less attention to economic, cultural, environmental developments.
- And in the political field the largest parts of the activities of our own national foreign politicians never occurs on the news.
- What is left – the very tiny global news agenda – is regularly framed according to home-grown narratives. The era of so-called globalization has not developed a culture of growing intertextuality in news and of growing awareness of “the other’s” stories and perspectives. US mainstream media, for instance, told a substantially different story of 9/11

and the Iraq war than Arab media did. Depending on which side you listened to you heard much mass mediated gossip of “weapons of much destruction” or “American imperialism”, narratives that seemed to define the limits of “legitimate controversy”: a debate on US imperialism? Not in US mass media! Reflections on Palestinian terrorism – not in Arab media!

- Of course, this picture is a bit black and white – war discourses in different countries may also overlap to a certain degree. As a rule we might say: the less involved a country is in a war or international conflict, the bigger the chance for neutral and fair coverage - but also the bigger the chance that event is completely ignored.
- Global journalism is certainly not in general successful, plural and diversified communication. There are, at best, various zones of transnationality, for example, a Western or an Arab sphere, that define the limits of journalistic interactivity. Growing international exchanges and cooperation agreements between media – Al-Jazeera and western networks – have helped to circulate images, but not texts and contexts. Media globalization is based on an inborn hierarchy whereby music and images circulate much easier than “meaning” across borders.

Effects

Empirical facts alone won't help us understand fact or fiction in global journalism. Is the current global agenda big enough or too small? Is the degree of intertextuality sufficient or not? Is the glass half full or half empty? Networking theoreticians like Castells usually argue that economic and other relations between states have created new spaces of social meaning production

(Castells 1996-97). But I agree with authors like Nick Couldry that the idea of networking is insufficient (Couldry 2006). It does not deal with the relation between the media and social or political interests. Global economy might be on the rise – but the global public sphere is still nuclear in mainstream media and is lacking behind. Systems theory clarifies that network interactions resonate with the function of the media to reduce complexity of the world. But it also shows that the dominant system is still the nation state (or sometimes the geo-linguistic region) (Hafez 2007).

Except for the very few “global issues” there is no integrated world media system that generates meaning for all of us (the reason behind it is limited interdependence, see below). The mass media have hardly any social or political impact *beyond* national confines. On the contrary they reinforce imaginary borders, which can also be demonstrated by deliberative theories which have always been at the heart of the idea of global system change.

Cosmopolitanism, for example, states that we can keep our own distinct values, but we also need to develop super-values of tolerance if we want the globalization to expand peacefully (Dower 2003). To what extent have the mass media helped to bring about cosmopolitan values? Empirical studies say that cosmopolitanism is a weak culture, world-wide, that patriotism prevails. The era of global media has not changed, for example, the enormous stereotypes that exist in the West of Islam and of Muslims. Modern media have hardly globalized values, maybe of cosmopolitan elites, but not of many ordinary people.

One of the core assumptions of the Knowledge Society paradigm is that with current technologies, knowledge need not be constrained by geographic proximity and could overcome the Eurocentric limitations of the classical

Enlightenment. Looking at the realities of foreign news agenda, however, we must confess that the journalism is far from that utopia. It creates fragmented knowledge about the world, especially outside of its native geo-cultural spheres. There are much more “unknowns” than “knowns”. Of course, the world is too complex to be explained in foreign news, but one could transform at least some of the “unknowns” into “knowns” and the rest into “known unknowns”. From this perspective, we should seek to enlarge the space for international coverage also in mainstream media, and we should help our audiences to develop a “culture of non-understanding” (Scheunpflug 2000). We need paradox interventions that, at least occasionally, turn the routines of agenda-setting and framing upside down. Instead of *labelling* countries journalism needs to *enable* audiences to develop truly dialogical and intertextual global knowledge.

It is tempting to adhere to the formula: the Internet is made for Knowledge Society, but Journalism is made for Global Governance. If you think the task of mainstream media is to inform citizens merely of the most pressing world affairs with international relevance, the limited agendas of foreign news seem less depressing. They might not allow for a post-ethnocentric turn, but they could be a tool to handle some major political issues of war and peace. Of course, this is not any longer the vision of a “global village” but an echo of realist theory. And even this view is problematic. *Can we really separate the global from the local?* When Afghanistan became world news much of the world wasn’t prepared for it. *How can we define the global core of agenda setting?* Terrorism, for example, isn’t as important to many countries as it is to the US. *How do we deal with the fact that the bulk of the national foreign policy and global policies is not in the news?* Horizontal “global” communication can only be successful if vertical “national” communication between policy makers and civil societies becomes more transparent and democratized. *Even if we could successfully arrive at a minimal global agenda – is the media’s framing good enough for*

GG? The more pressing an international political problem becomes – war and peace – the less you can trust the mass media as a source for global governance. This is also true for transnational networks like CNN or Al-Jazeera which are really hybrids of national media. One of my students recently asked: What is a democratic media system good for that fails at decisive moments of war and peace? Good question.

Causes

Information interconnections and exchanges remain very fragile, from whatever theoretical angle you look at them. The mass media are a news gathering machine whose interactions reach beyond borders, but whose system imperatives and environmental influences remain national or at best regional (Hafez 2007). Where news are sold as global products they are domesticated by local producers, markets and consumers (this is why the core of *real* globalization today is entertainment, not news). The consumer is not the ideal cosmopolitan human being; media watch initiatives are rare. Markets react to those deficits, and the market therefore is not a pushing factor behind intertextuality in news or a simple growth of the international news agenda. The capacities of media organizations to invest in foreign news making in times are rather shrinking than expanding. Hierarchies also play a great role in international news: CNN is proof of the fact that even a highly internationalized staff can be left with what migration researchers have called “representation without participation”. Of course, journalists have their own stereotypes, and they are very often not ideal type cosmopolitans. And last but not least, domestic governments are closer to domestic media in foreign news than other governments – the political system is not yet internationalized, and therefore influences on the media are systematically national in character.

We definitely need structural changes if we want to transform the fundamentally national mainstream mass media into global entities. The globalization debate so far has concentrated on the seemingly new, the new chances to get informed through satellite TV and the Internet, on curious information elites, that have certainly created new spaces of global exchange. But these spaces and elites are much smaller than many people think, and the globalization debate must turn its attention to the mainstream media, to ordinary people and to traditional journalism in search of better informed debates on how to handle globalization.

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