

The Global Transformations Reader

An Introduction to the Globalization Debate

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The Globalization of Communication

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One of the salient features of communication in the modern world is that it takes place on a scale that is increasingly global. Messages are transmitted across large distances with relative ease, so that individuals have access to information and communication which originates from distant sources. Moreover, with the uncoupling of space and time brought about by electronic media, the access to messages stemming from spatially remote sources can be instantaneous (or virtually so). Distance has been eclipsed by proliferating networks of electronic communication. Individuals can interact with one another, or can act within frameworks of mediated quasi-interaction, even though they are situated, in terms of the practical contexts of their day-to-day lives, in different parts of the world.

The reordering of space and time brought about by the development of the media is part of a broader set of processes which have transformed (and are still transforming) the modern world. These processes are commonly described today as 'globalization'. The term is not a precise one, and it is used in differing ways in the literature.¹ In the most general sense, it refers to the growing interconnectedness of different parts of the world, a process which gives rise to complex forms of interaction and interdependency. Defined in this way, 'globalization' may seem indistinguishable from related terms such as 'internationalization' and 'transnationalization', and these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature. But while these various notions refer to phenomena that are closely connected, the process of globalization, as I shall understand it here, involves more than the expansion of activities beyond the boundaries of particular nation-states. Globalization arises only when (a) activities take place in an arena which is global or nearly so (rather than merely regional, for example); (b) activities are organized, planned or coordinated on a global scale; and (c) activities involve some degree of reciprocity and interdependency, such that localized activities situated in different parts of the world are shaped by one another. One can speak of globalization in this sense only when the growing interconnectedness of different regions and locales becomes systematic and reciprocal to some degree, and only when the scope of interconnectedness is effectively global.

[...]

There can be no doubt that the organization of economic activity and concentrations of economic power have played a crucial role in the process of globalization. But all forms of power – economic, political, coercive and symbolic – have both contributed to and been affected by this process. If one retraces the process of globalization, one finds that these various forms of power overlap with one another in complex

ways, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes conflicting with one another, creating a shifting interplay of forms of power. In this chapter I shall focus primarily on the social organization of symbolic power and the ways in which it has contributed to and been transformed by the process of globalization. But this will necessarily involve some discussion of economic, political and coercive power as well.

[...]

The Emergence of Global Communication Networks

The practice of transmitting messages across extended stretches of space is not new. [...] Elaborate networks of postal communication were established by political authorities in the Roman Empire and by political, ecclesiastical and commercial elites in medieval Europe. With the development of printing in the late fifteenth century, books, pamphlets and other printed materials were circulated well beyond the locales of their production, frequently crossing the frontiers of the emerging nation-states. Moreover, as European powers developed trading relations with other parts of the world, communication channels were established between Europe and those regions of the world that were drawn increasingly into the spheres of European colonial expansion.

It was only in the nineteenth century, however, that communication networks were systematically organized on a global scale. It was in the nineteenth century, therefore, that the globalization of communication took hold. This was partly due to the development of new technologies which enabled communication to be dissociated from physical transportation. But it was also linked directly to economic, political and military considerations. I shall examine the beginnings of the globalization of communication by focusing on three key developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: (1) the development of underwater cable systems by the European imperial powers; (2) the establishment of international news agencies and their division of the world into exclusive spheres of operation; and (3) the formation of international organizations concerned with the allocation of the electromagnetic spectrum.

(1) The telegraph was the first medium of communication which successfully exploited the communication potential of electricity. Experiments with early forms of telegraphy took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the first electromagnetic telegraphs were developed in the 1830s. In 1831 Joseph Henry of Albany, New York, succeeded in transmitting signals over a mile-long circuit, and by 1837 usable systems had been developed by Cooke and Wheatstone in England and Morse in the United States. The system devised by Cooke and Wheatstone, which used needles that could be read visually, was initially installed along the railway between Paddington and West Drayton in July 1839. But Morse's system, which used a dot-dash code for the transmission of messages, eventually proved to be the most successful. In 1843 Morse built his first practical telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore with funds provided by the US Congress. Subsequently the telegraph industry developed rapidly in the United States and in Europe, stimulated by demand from the railways, the press, and the business and financial sectors.

The early telegraph systems were land-based and therefore restricted in terms of their geographical scope. It was not until the 1850s that reliable methods of underwater telegraphy were developed. The early submarine cables were generally made

of copper wire coated with gutta percha, a natural insulating material made from the sap of a Malaysian tree.² In 1851-2 submarine cables were successfully laid across the English Channel and between England and Ireland. In 1857-8 the first attempt was made to lay a cable across the Atlantic Ocean, though it ended in failure. The first attempts to link Britain with India were similarly unsuccessful. In 1864, however, a submarine cable was successfully laid between Karachi and the Persian Gulf; the line was then connected by land-based cables to Constantinople and Europe. By 1865 a telegraph link between Britain and India was complete. A year later, a transatlantic cable was successfully laid.

Following these early successes, the submarine cable industry developed rapidly. In the early 1870s, cables were laid throughout South-East Asia, so that Europe was linked to China and Australia. Cables were also laid between Europe and South America, and along the coasts of Africa. Most of the cables were produced, laid and operated by private companies, although these companies often received substantial financial assistance from governments. London was the centre of this expanding communication network and was the principal source of finance for the international submarine cable business. By 1900, approximately 190,000 miles of submarine cable had been laid throughout the world. British firms owned 72 per cent of these cables, and a substantial proportion were owned by one firm – the Eastern and Associated Companies founded by the Manchester merchant John Pender, who had been involved in the submarine cable industry since the 1860s.

The early submarine cable networks were used primarily for commercial and business purposes, although political and military concerns also played an important role in their development. As leaders of the most extensive empire of the late nineteenth century, British officials were well aware of the strategic value of rapid communications. The British Admiralty and the Colonial, War and Foreign Offices placed pressure on the government to construct additional submarine cables which did not cross non-British territories, and which would therefore be less vulnerable in times of crisis. One such cable was laid between Britain and the Cape of Good Hope in 1899-1901, and was used during the Boer War. This line was subsequently extended to Mauritius, Ceylon, Singapore and Australia, thereby connecting Britain to South-East Asia and Australia via a route which avoided the Middle East.

The submarine cable networks developed in the second half of the nineteenth century thus constituted the first global system of communication in which the capacity to transmit messages was clearly separated from the time-consuming processes of transportation. Individuals located in the major urban centres of Europe and North America acquired the means to communicate almost instantaneously with other parts of the world. The contrast with earlier forms of transport-based communication was dramatic. Up to the 1830s, a letter posted in England took five to eight months to reach India, and due to monsoons in the Indian Ocean, it could take two years for a reply to be received.³ In the 1870s, a telegram could reach Bombay in five hours, and the answer could be back on the same day. And in 1924, at the British Empire Exhibition, King George V sent himself a telegram which circled the globe on all-British lines in 80 seconds. Rapid communication on a global scale – albeit along routes that reflected the organization of economic and political power – was a reality.

(2) A second development of the nineteenth century which was of considerable significance for the formation of global communication networks was the establishment

of international news agencies. The significance of news agencies in this context was threefold. First, the agencies were concerned with the systematic gathering and dissemination of news and other information over large territories – primarily in Europe to begin with, but soon extending to other parts of the world. Second, after an initial period of competitive rivalry, the major news agencies eventually agreed to divide up the world into mutually exclusive spheres of operation, thus creating a multilateral ordering of communication networks which was effectively global in scope. Third, the news agencies worked closely with the press, providing newspapers with stories, extracts and information which could be printed and diffused to a wide audience. Hence the news agencies were tied into networks of communication which, via print (and later radio and television), would reach a significant and growing proportion of the population.

The first news agency was established in Paris by Charles Havas in 1835.⁴ A wealthy entrepreneur, Havas acquired what was primarily a translating office, the *Correspondence Garnier*, and turned it into an agency which collected extracts from various European papers and delivered them daily to the French press. By 1840 the agency catered for clients in London and Brussels as well, supplying news by coach and by means of a regular pigeon service. In the late 1840s, rival news-gathering services were set up in London by Paul Julius Reuter and in Berlin by Bernard Wolff. The agencies took advantage of the development of telegraph cable systems, which made it possible to transmit information over ever-greater distances at great speed. Competition among the three agencies intensified in the 1850s, as each agency sought to secure new clients and to expand its sphere of operation. However, in order to avoid damaging conflicts, the agencies eventually decided to cooperate by dividing the world up into mutually exclusive territories. By virtue of the Agency Alliance Treaty of 1869, Reuter obtained the territories of the British Empire and the Far East; Havas acquired the French Empire, Italy, Spain and Portugal; and Wolff was granted the exclusive right to operate in German, Austrian, Scandinavian and Russian territories. While the agencies were independent commercial organizations, their domains of operation corresponded to the spheres of economic and political influence of the major European imperial powers. Each agency worked closely with the political and commercial elites of the country which served as its home base, enjoying some degree of political patronage and providing information which was valuable for the conduct of trade and diplomacy.

The triple agency cartel dominated the international collection and dissemination of news until the outbreak of the First World War. Other news agencies were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but most had aligned themselves with one of the three principals. In the wake of the First World War, however, the triple agency cartel was broken by the expansion of two American agencies, Associated Press (AP) and the United Press Association (UPA, subsequently transformed into United Press International or UPI). Associated Press was a cooperative established in 1848 by six New York daily newspapers. AP joined the European cartel in 1893, agreeing to supply the European agencies with news from America in return for the exclusive right to distribute news in the United States. The United Press Association was founded by E. W. Scripps in 1907, partly in order to break the hold of AP in the domestic US news market. In addition to serving the US market, UPA set up offices in South America and sold news to South American and Japanese newspapers. During the First World War and its aftermath, both AP and UPA expanded

their activities worldwide, placing increasing pressure on the cartel arrangements. By the early 1930s the triple agency cartel was effectively at an end; in 1934 Reuters signed a new agreement with AP which gave the American agencies a free hand to collect and distribute news throughout the world. While the American agencies expanded rapidly and Reuters maintained a strong position in the global market, the other European agencies underwent major changes. The capitulation of France in 1940 brought about the dissolution of Havas, although it was eventually replaced by a new agency, the Agence France-Presse (AFP), which took over many of the assets and connections of its predecessor. With the rise of Nazism and the subsequent defeat and partition of Germany following the Second World War, the Wolff agency lost its position of influence in the international domain and eventually disappeared.

Since the Second World War, the four major agencies – Reuters, AP, UPI and AFP – have maintained their positions of dominance in the international system for the collection and dissemination of news and other information. Many other agencies have been established and expanded their spheres of operation; and some agencies, such as TASS and the Deutsche Presse Agentur, acquired (at least temporarily) a prominent international role. But the four majors remain the key actors in the global information order. Many newspapers and broadcasting organizations throughout the world depend heavily on them for international news, as well as for news of their own geopolitical region, and many of the smaller agencies are affiliated to them. The major news agencies have also expanded and diversified their activities, taking advantage of new developments in information and communication technology and emerging as central players in the new global market for information and data of various kinds, including information relating to financial and commercial transactions.⁵

The dominance of the major news agencies, combined with other inequalities in the international flow of information and communication, has led to calls from various quarters for a reorganization of the global information order. A series of conferences and commissions sponsored by UNESCO in the 1970s and early 1980s generated a wide-ranging debate on the theme of a 'New World Information and Communication Order' (NWICO). The proponents of NWICO were seeking a more equitable balance in the international flow and content of information, as well as a strengthening of the technological infrastructures and productive capacities of less developed countries in the sphere of communication. But the UNESCO initiatives met with considerable resistance from certain governments and interest groups in the West. In 1984 the United States withdrew from UNESCO, followed by the United Kingdom in 1985; together this deprived UNESCO of around 30 per cent of its budget and greatly limited the effectiveness of any policy recommendations.⁶ Nevertheless, the NWICO debate helped to increase awareness of the issues raised by the dominance of the major news agencies and, more generally, by the inequalities associated with the globalization of communication. It also helped to stimulate the development of various forms of cooperation among so-called Third World countries, including the expansion of regional and non-aligned news agencies in Africa and elsewhere.⁷

(3) A third development which played an important role in the globalization of communication also stems from the late nineteenth century: it concerns the development of new means of transmitting information via electromagnetic waves and the succession of attempts to regulate the allocation of the electromagnetic spectrum. [...] The use of electromagnetic waves for the purposes of communication greatly expanded the capacity to transmit information across large distances in a flexible and cost-efficient

way, dispensing with the need to lay fixed cables over land or under sea. But the increasing use of electromagnetic waves also created a growing need to regulate the allocation of spectrum space both within and between countries. Each country developed its own legislative framework for spectrum allocation and selective licensing. Initially one of the key concerns of the authorities entrusted with the task of allocating spectrum space was to set aside a segment of the spectrum for military and security purposes, thereby minimizing interference from amateur radio users. But as the commercial potential of the new medium became increasingly clear, political authorities became directly involved in the selective licensing of broadcasting organizations, which were granted exclusive rights to broadcast at designated frequencies in particular regions. The practices of selective licensing were shaped not only by the technical constraints of spectrum scarcity but also by a broader set of political considerations concerning the proper nature and role of broadcasting organizations, considerations which varied greatly from one country to another.⁸

The international frameworks for the management of spectrum space were less effective. The key organization in this regard was the International Telegraph Union, subsequently transformed into the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Originally formed in 1865 under a convention signed by 20 European states, the union was concerned primarily with the establishment of international standards and the resolution of technical problems.⁹ At its 1906 Berlin conference, it dealt with radio for the first time and agreed to allocate certain sections of the spectrum to specific services, such as the frequencies used by ships at sea. Subsequently the ITU convened a regular conference – the World Administrative Radio Conference or WARC – to address problems of spectrum allocation and related issues. In the early phase of these international activities, frequencies were generally allocated on a first come, first served basis.¹⁰ Users simply notified the ITU of the frequencies they were using or wished to use, and they thereby acquired a 'squatter's right'. But as demands on the radio spectrum increased, the ITU gradually adopted a more active stance. Sections of the spectrum were allocated to particular services, and the world was divided into three broad regions – Europe and Africa, the Americas, and Asia and the South Pacific – which could each be planned in more detail. The systems developed by the ITU have none the less come under increasing pressure in recent years, partly as a result of rising demands by existing users and partly due to new demands by countries hitherto largely excluded from the domain of international telecommunications.

The development of technologies capable of transmitting messages via electromagnetic waves, together with the emergence of national and international organizations concerned with the management of spectrum space, marked a decisive advance in the globalization of communication. It was now possible to transmit increasing quantities of information over large distances in an efficient and virtually instantaneous way. Moreover, the messages transmitted by electromagnetic waves were potentially accessible to anyone who was within range of the signals and who had the equipment to receive them – a fact which was of enormous significance for the commercial exploitation of the medium. However, during the first half of the twentieth century most communication by electromagnetic transmission remained confined to specific geographical locales, such as particular urban areas, nation-states or the regions between land and ships at sea. It was not until the 1960s, with the launching of the first successful geo-stationary communication satellites, that communication by electromagnetic transmission became fully global in scope. I shall return to this development shortly.

Patterns of Global Communication Today: An Overview

While the origins of the globalization of communication can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, this process is primarily a phenomenon of the twentieth. For it is during the twentieth century that the flow of information and communication on a global scale has become a regularized and pervasive feature of social life. There are, of course, many dimensions to this process; the twentieth century has witnessed an unparalleled proliferation of the channels of communication and information diffusion. The rapid development of systems of radio and television broadcasting throughout the world has been an important but by no means the only aspect of this process. The globalization of communication has also been a structured and uneven process which has benefited some more than others, and which has drawn some parts of the world into networks of global communication more quickly than other parts. Since the late 1960s, the characteristics of global communication flows have been studied in some detail by researchers in international communication – well before the term 'globalization' gained currency in the social sciences.¹¹ In this section I shall draw on this literature for the purpose of analysing some of the main patterns of global communication today. I shall not attempt to analyse these patterns in a detailed and comprehensive fashion, but merely to identify some of the main dimensions of globalized communication processes; and I shall be concerned above all to highlight their structured and uneven character. While the range of relevant issues is potentially very wide, I shall restrict my attention to four themes: (1) the emergence of transnational communication conglomerates as key players in the global system of communication and information diffusion; (2) the social impact of new technologies, especially those associated with satellite communication; (3) the asymmetrical flow of information and communication products within the global system; and (4) the variations and inequalities in terms of access to the global networks of communication.

(1) The globalization of communication in the twentieth century is a process that has been driven primarily by the activities of large-scale communication conglomerates. The origins of these conglomerates can be traced back to the transformation of the press in the nineteenth century [...]. The change in the economic basis of newspapers, precipitated and promoted by the introduction of new methods of production, set in motion a long-term process of accumulation and concentration in the media industries. In the course of the twentieth century, this process has increasingly assumed a transnational character. Communication conglomerates have expanded their operations in regions other than their countries of origin; and some of the large industrial and financial concerns have, as part of explicit policies of global expansion and diversification, acquired substantial interests in the information and communication sector. Through mergers, acquisitions and other forms of corporate growth, the large conglomerates have assumed an ever-greater presence in the global arena of the information and communication trade.

The names of some of the largest communication conglomerates are well known: Time Warner, formed by the merger of Time, Inc., and Warner Communications in 1989 and now the largest media enterprise in the world, has subsidiaries in Australia, Asia, Europe and Latin America. The German-based Bertelsmann group, with strong interests in publishing, television, music and high-tech information systems, has

operations in Europe, the United States and Latin America. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which has substantial interests in publishing, television and film, probably has the most extensive reach, with subsidiaries in Europe, the United States, Australia and Asia. These and other large communication conglomerates operate increasingly in a worldwide market and organize their activities on the basis of strategies which are effectively global in design. But nearly all of the large conglomerates are based in North America, Western Europe, Australia or Japan; very few are based in Third World countries, although the latter provide important markets for their goods and services.¹² Hence the development of communication conglomerates has led to the formation of large concentrations of economic and symbolic power which are privately controlled and unevenly distributed, and which can deploy massive resources to pursue corporate objectives in a global arena. It has also led to the formation of extensive, privately controlled networks of communication through which information and symbolic content can flow.

The nature and activities of some of the large communication conglomerates have been documented in the literature and I shall not examine them further here.¹³ There is a need, however, for more up-to-date comparative research on the activities of these conglomerates, on the ways in which they are adapting to the changing economic and political circumstances of the 1990s, and on their exploitation of new technological developments.

(2) The development of new technologies has played an important role in the globalization of communication in the late twentieth century, both in conjunction with the activities of communication conglomerates and independently of them. Three inter-related developments have been particularly important. One is the deployment of more extensive and sophisticated cable systems which provide much greater capacity for the transmission of electronically encoded information. A second development is the increasing use of satellites for the purposes of long-distance communication, often in conjunction with land-based cable systems. The third development – in many ways the most fundamental – is the increasing use of digital methods of information processing, storage and retrieval. The digitalization of information, combined with the development of related electronic technologies (microprocessors, etc.), has greatly increased the capacity to store and transmit information and has created the basis for a convergence of information and communication technologies, so that information can be converted relatively easily between different communication media.

All three of these technological developments have contributed in fundamental ways to the globalization of communication. Most obviously, the use of telecommunications satellites, positioned in geosynchronous orbits and interlinked, has created a system of global communication which is virtually instantaneous and which dispenses with the need for terrestrial relays and transmission wires. Since their development in the early 1960s, telecommunications satellites have been used for a variety of purposes.¹⁴ The needs of the military and of large commercial organizations have always played an important role, and many multinational corporations make extensive use of satellite communication. Satellites have also been increasingly integrated into the normal telecommunications networks, carrying a growing proportion of the international traffic in telephone, telex, fax, electronic mail and related communication services.

From the outset, telecommunications satellites were also used as relay stations and distribution points for television broadcasting. They formed an integral part of

national network systems in the USA, the former USSR and elsewhere, and they were used as distribution points to supply cable systems on a national and international basis. In recent years, however, the development of more sophisticated satellites, capable of transmitting stronger, well-targeted signals, has made possible the introduction of direct broadcasting by satellite (or DBS). The first DBS systems began transmitting programmes in the USA in 1975, and the first European systems began operating in 1986; by the early 1990s, a variety of DBS systems were operating or planned in other parts of the world. Part of the significance of DBS is that it creates new distribution systems outside of the established terrestrially based networks of broadcasting – systems which are often privately owned and controlled and in which the large communication conglomerates may have a substantial stake. Moreover, these new distribution systems are inherently transnational since, from a technical point of view, there is no reason why the reception area (or 'footprint') of a DBS satellite should correspond even roughly to the territorial boundaries of a particular nation-state.

In addition to creating new transnational distribution networks, the development of DBS and other technologies (including cable and videocassette recorders) has expanded the global market for media products. The international flow of films, TV programmes and other materials has increased as producers and distributors seek to exploit the lucrative markets created by satellite and cable channels and by videocassette rentals and sales. This expansion of the global market should be viewed against the backdrop of earlier trends in the international flow of media products.

(3) A central feature of the globalization of communication is the fact that media products circulate in an international arena. Material produced in one country is distributed not only in the domestic market but also – and increasingly – in a global market. It has long been recognized, however, that the international flow of media products is a structured process in which certain organizations have a dominant role, and in which some regions of the world are heavily dependent on others for the supply of symbolic goods. Studies carried out in the early 1970s by Nordenstreng and Vais showed a clear asymmetry in the international flow of television programmes: there was, to a large extent, a one-way traffic in news and entertainment programmes from the major exporting countries to the rest of the world.¹⁵ The United States was (and remains) the leading exporter in television programming, selling far more material to other countries (especially to Latin America, Europe, Canada, Australia and Japan) than it imports from abroad. Some European countries, such as Britain and France, were also major exporters (and remain so); but, unlike the United States, they also imported a significant quantity of programming from abroad (mainly from the US). Subsequent studies by Vais and others have tended to confirm the unevenness of flow, although they have also produced a more complex picture and have highlighted the growing importance of intraregional trade (for instance, countries like Mexico and Brazil have emerged as major producers and exporters of programming material to other parts of Latin America).¹⁶

The structured character of the international flow of symbolic goods is the outcome of various historical and economic factors. In the domain of news, the patterns of dependence reflect the legacy of the international news agencies established in London, Paris and New York (although the precise significance of Western-based news agencies remains a matter of some dispute¹⁷). In the sphere of entertainment, the economic power of Hollywood continues to exert a major influence on the international flow of films and

TV programmes. Many television stations in less developed countries do not have the resources to produce extensive programming of their own. The import of American serials, at prices negotiated on a country-by-country basis, is a relatively inexpensive (and financially very attractive) way to fill broadcasting schedules.

While some of the broad patterns of international flow have been documented over the years, the research remains fragmentary. There are many sectors of the information and communication industries which have yet to be studied in detail from this point of view. And the ways in which existing patterns of international flow will be affected by new technological developments – such as those associated with satellite and cable systems, or those linked more generally to the digitalization of information – is a question which demands a good deal more research. Given the complexity of global networks of transmission and trade and the huge volume of material which passes through them, it is unlikely that our understanding of patterns of international flow will ever be more than partial. But further research could help to shed light on some of the more significant trends.

(4) In addition to analysing the patterns of international flow, it is essential to consider the patterns of access to and uptake of material transmitted through global networks. Much of the research on patterns of international flow has been based on the content analysis of television broadcasting schedules in different countries. But in some parts of the world, access to television broadcasting services was restricted for many years to the relatively small proportion of the population which lived in the major urban areas. For the rural population, which comprises 70–90 per cent of the population in many Third World countries, radio has probably been a more important medium of communication than television.¹⁸ Of course, this situation is changing continuously as more resources are devoted to the development of television services and as more individuals and families are able to gain access to them. But significant inequalities remain in terms of the capacity of individuals in different parts of the world, and in different parts and social strata of the same country, to gain access to the materials which are diffused through global networks.

Quite apart from these inequalities of access, globalized symbolic materials are subjected to different patterns of uptake. Taken on its own, the content analysis of programming schedules tells us relatively little about who watches which programmes, how long they watch them for, etc., and hence tells us relatively little about the extent of uptake of globally distributed material.¹⁹ Moreover, if we wish to explore the impact of the globalization of communication, we must consider not only the patterns of uptake but also the *uses* of globalized symbolic materials – that is, what recipients do with them, how they understand them, and how they incorporate them into the routines and practices of their everyday lives.

[...]

Globalized Diffusion, Localized Appropriation: Towards a Theory of Media Globalization

[...]

We have already shed some light on the global-local axis by examining some of the patterns of global diffusion. I now want to develop this analysis further by focusing

on the process of appropriation and pursuing three interrelated themes. The first theme is this: given the hermeneutical character of appropriation, it follows that the significance which media messages have for individuals and the uses to which mediated symbolic materials are put by recipients depend crucially on the contexts of reception and on the resources that recipients bring to bear on the reception process. This is well illustrated by the Liebes and Katz study of the reception of *Dallas*. It is also vividly demonstrated by the perceptive account by Stiebrny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi of the role of communication media in the Iranian Revolution.²⁰ During the 1970s, traditional religious language and imagery were used in Iran as symbolic weapons in the struggle against the Shah, who was associated with the corrupting importation of Western culture. Although Khomeini was in exile, his speeches and sermons were recorded and smuggled into Iran on audiocassettes, which were easily reproduced and widely diffused. But with the development of an Islamic regime in the post-revolutionary period, Western cultural products began to assume a very different significance for many Iranians. Videos of Western films and tapes of Western pop music circulated as part of a popular cultural underground, taking on a subversive character; they helped to create an alternative cultural space in which individuals could take some distance from a regime experienced by many as oppressive.²¹ Examples such as these illustrate well the contextually bounded character of the process of appropriation. As symbolic materials circulate on an ever-greater scale, locales become sites where, to an ever-increasing extent, globalized media products are received, interpreted and incorporated into the daily lives of individuals. Through the localized process of appropriation, media products are embedded in sets of practices which shape and alter their significance.

Let us now consider a second theme: how should we understand the social impact of the localized appropriation of globalized media products? Here I want to emphasize one key feature of this process. I want to suggest that the appropriation of globalized symbolic materials involves what I shall describe as *the accentuation of symbolic distancing from the spatial-temporal contexts of everyday life*. The appropriation of symbolic materials enables individuals to take some distance from the conditions of their day-to-day lives – not literally but symbolically, imaginatively, vicariously. Individuals are able to gain some conception, however partial, of ways of life and life conditions which differ significantly from their own. They are able to gain some conception of regions of the world which are far removed from their own locales.

The phenomenon of symbolic distancing is brought out well by James Lull in his study of the impact of television in China.²² Television became a widespread medium in China only in the course of the 1980s. In the 1960s and 1970s relatively few television sets were sold in China; they were very expensive relative to normal wages and were generally restricted to the more privileged urban elites. In the 1980s, however, domestic television production increased dramatically; by 1990 most urban families owned at least one TV set, and there was about one set for every eight people nationwide.²³ Broadcasting is dominated by the national network, Central China Television (CCTV), which supplies a large proportion of the programming material to the various regional and local stations operating throughout the country.

What sense do Chinese viewers make of the programmes they watch? Lull pursues this question through a series of extended interviews with families in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Xian. Among other things, he shows that, while many

Chinese viewers are critical of the programmes available to them, they value television for the way that it offers new vistas, new lifestyles and new ways of thinking. 'In our daily lives we just go to work and come home, so we want to see something that is different from our own life. TV gives us a model of the rest of the world';²⁴ this comment by a 58-year-old accountant from Shanghai captures well the effect of symbolic distancing in the age of global communication. Chinese viewers are drawn to programmes imported from Japan, Taiwan, Europe and the United States not only for their information and entertainment value, but also because they give a glimpse – albeit a fleeting and partial one – of what life is like elsewhere. When people watch international news, for instance, they may pay as much attention to street scenes, housing and clothing as to the commentary which accompanies the pictures from foreign lands.

[...] In emphasizing the phenomenon of symbolic distancing, I do not want to suggest, of course, that this is the *only* aspect of the process of appropriation which is worthy of consideration. On the contrary, in the actual circumstances of day-to-day life, it is likely that the appropriation of globalized media products will interact with localized practices in complex ways and may, in some respects, serve to consolidate established relations of power or, indeed, to create new forms of dependency. [...]

This brings us to a third theme that I want briefly to consider: the localized appropriation of globalized media products is also a source of tension and potential conflict. It is a source of tension partly because media products can convey images and messages which clash with, or do not entirely support, the values associated with a traditional way of life. In some contexts this discordance may be part of the very appeal of media products: they help individuals to take a distance, to imagine alternatives, and thereby to question traditional practices. So, for instance, it seems that Egyptian soap operas are of interest to young Bedouin women in the Western Desert precisely because they present a set of lifestyles – such as the possibility of marrying for love and living separately from the extended family – which diverge from the set of options traditionally available to them.²⁵

[...] It would be imprudent to claim that the localized appropriation of globalized media products has been a major factor in stimulating broader forms of social conflict and social change in the modern world; most forms of social conflict are extremely complex and involve many diverse factors. But it could be plausibly argued that the increasingly globalized diffusion of media products has played a role in triggering off some of the more dramatic conflicts of recent years. Lull contends that the stream of domestic and international television programmes transmitted throughout China in the 1980s created a cultural reservoir of alternative visions, encouraging people to question traditional values and official interpretations and helping them to imagine alternative ways of living. By itself, this certainly did not bring about the audacious demonstration in Tiananmen Square, nor did it determine the course of the subsequent confrontation. But in the absence of television it seems unlikely that the events of Tiananmen Square would have unfolded in the way they did, nor would they have been witnessed by millions of individuals in China and throughout the world.

[...]

Notes

- 1 For a review of different usages, see Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), esp. ch. 1.
- 2 See Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), ch. 11; Bernard S. Finn, *Submarine Telegraphy: The Grand Victorian Technology* (Margate: Thanet Press, 1973).
- 3 Headrick, *The Tools of Empire*, p. 130.
- 4 For more detailed accounts of the development of the major news agencies, see Graham Storey, *Reuters' Century 1851-1951* (London: Max Parrish, 1951); Oliver Boyd-Barrett, *The International News Agencies* (London: Constable, 1980); Anthony Smith, *The Geopolitics of Information: How Western Culture Dominates the World* (London: Faber, 1980).
- 5 The growth and diversification of Reuters in the 1970s and 1980s was particularly pronounced. In 1963, two-thirds of Reuters' revenue of £3 million came from media subscribers. In 1989, the media accounted for only 7 per cent of Reuters' revenue; 55 per cent was derived from the money market, 19 per cent from securities, 8 per cent from commodities and 11 per cent from client services. By 1990 Reuters' overall revenue had risen to £1,369 million, of which 82.5 per cent was earned overseas. (See Jeremy Tunstall and Michael Palmer, *Media Moguls* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 56.)
- 6 For a detailed account of the NWICO debate and the role of UNESCO, see Thomas L. McPhail, *Electronic Colonialism: The Future of International Broadcasting and Communication*, 2nd edn (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987).
- 7 On the development of news agencies and other mechanisms of information exchange in Third World countries, see Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Daya Kishan Thussu, *Contra-Flow in Global News: International and Regional News Exchange Mechanisms* (London: John Libbey, 1992).
- 8 For further discussion of the institutional frameworks of broadcasting, see John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 183-92.
- 9 See McPhail, *Electronic Colonialism*, ch. 5; John Hawkins, 'The management of the spectrum', *InterMedia* 7(5) (Sept. 1979): 10-22.
- 10 Hawkins, 'The management of the spectrum', p. 14.
- 11 Among the most important and influential of the early studies were the UNESCO-sponsored surveys carried out by Nordenstreng and Varis in 1971-3 and by Varis in 1983. See Kaarle Nordenstreng and Tapio Varis, *Television Traffic - A One-Way Street? A Survey and Analysis of the International Flow of Television Programme Material*, Reports and Papers on Mass Communication, no. 70 (Paris: UNESCO, 1974); Tapio Varis, *International Flow of Television Programmes*, Reports and Papers on Mass Communication, no. 100 (Paris: UNESCO, 1986). Numerous other studies have been carried out. For useful discussions of the relevant literature, see Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Are American: Anglo-American Media in the World* (London: Constable, 1977); Elihu Katz and George Wedel, *Broadcasting in the Third World: Promise and Performance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977); Smith, *The Geopolitics of Information*; Ralph Negrine and S. Papathanassopoulos, *The Internationalization of Television* (London: Pinter, 1990); Preben Seestrup, *Transnationalization of Television in Europe* (London: John Libbey, 1990); Annabelle Stebbins-Mohammadi, 'The global and the local in international communications', in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds), *Mass Media and Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1991); Geoffrey Reeves, *Communications and the 'Third World'* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 12 A recent UNESCO report on world communications showed that, of the 78 largest communication conglomerates ranked according to total media turnover, 39 were based in the United States, 25 in Western Europe, 8 in Japan, 5 in Canada and 1 in Australia; none

- were based in the Third World. (See *World Communication Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 1989), pp. 104-5.)
- 13 See, for example, Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 4th edn (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Anthony Smith, *The Age of Behemoths: The Globalization of Mass Media Firms* (New York: Priority Press, 1991); Tunstall and Palmer, *Media Moguls*.
- 14 For further discussion of historical and technical aspects of satellite communications, see Abram Chayes, James Fawcett, Masami Ito, Alexandre-Charles Kiss et al., *Satellite Broadcasting* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Jonathan F. Galloway, *The Politics and Technology of Satellite Communications* (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1972).
- 15 Nordenstreng and Varis, *Television Traffic*; see also Tapio Varis, 'Global traffic in television', *Journal of Communication* 24 (1974): 102-9.
- 16 See Varis, *International Flow of Television Programmes*; Annabelle Stebbins-Mohammadi, 'The "World of the News" study: results of international cooperation', *Journal of Communications* 34 (1984): 121-34; Seestrup, *Transnationalization of Television in Europe*. Some commentators have argued that the influence of Western-based news agencies has been exaggerated. See, for example, Robert L. Stevenson, 'The "World of the News" study: pseudo debate', *Journal of Communications* 34 (1984): 134-8; Michael Tracey, 'The poisoned chalice? International television and the idea of dominance', *Dialectics* 114 (1985): 17-55.
- 18 See Katz and Wedel, *Broadcasting in the Third World*, ch. 1.
- 19 For a discussion of some of the issues involved in studying patterns of consumption in relation to the globalization of communication, see Seestrup, *Transnationalization of Television in Western Europe*, ch. 4.
- 20 See Annabelle Stebbins-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 186-8.
- 22 See James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 24 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 171.
- 25 See Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Bedouins, cassettes and technologies of public culture', *Middle East Report* 159(4) (1989): 7-11, 47.