

International Communication Flow: Global Media's Performance

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It is perhaps fitting to start the inaugural issue of the Polish edition of *Global Media Journal* with an overview of issues pertaining to international communication flow and some debates surrounding it during the last thirty years.

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and dependent on ever more efficient means of exchanging ideas, people, and capital, many researchers' attention is directed towards globalization. Politically, the role of foreign affairs is on the increase all over the world, at least since the attacks on the World Trade Center. Culturally, due to information and communication technologies (ICTs) becoming more important parts of our lives and constituting critical elements of all countries' identity and well-being, the United Nations agencies have recently again tackled the problems of global media through their Geneva and Tunis World Summits on Information Society (International Telecommunication Union, 2005).

This paper offers some criticisms of global media by focusing primarily on quality and quantity of information traveling across the globe and on media's performance as carriers of information critical to informed and engaged citizenry.

Globalization is a term found daily in most debates on current cultural, political, and economic processes and across academic disciplines. It has become a buzz word, a phrase that is starting to have a life of its own. Also, the term "globalization" is often used interchangeably with Americanization and Westernization, adding to the confusion. Although globalization is to a large extent about expanding American cultural and political influence, particularly through the so-called soft power (Nye, 2003), the two processes are not identical (Marling, 2006). What is globalization then? Axford reiterates it as "the historical process whereby the world is being made into a single place with systemic properties" (2000, 240). In a text contributed in a panel on globalization held during the World Sociology Congress in Montreal, July 1998, Majid Tehranian said that: 1) Elements of globalization include transborder capital, labor, management, news, images, and data flows; 2) The main engines of globalization are the transnational corporations and transnational media organizations¹.

There are several aspects to this process, most of them related one way or another to communications media. For one thing, by causing enormous space-time compression, modern media have rendered both place and time obsolete. With information and capital traveling across continents in seconds, it is now possible to work from any place in the world. Global media are increasingly accessible in the most remote places on Earth, having a significant, if yet unknown, impact on local cultures. Large media events are now uniting the globe (see Dayan & Katz, 1992) by

¹ Among other agents of globalization, Tehranian listed: intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and alternative government organizations.

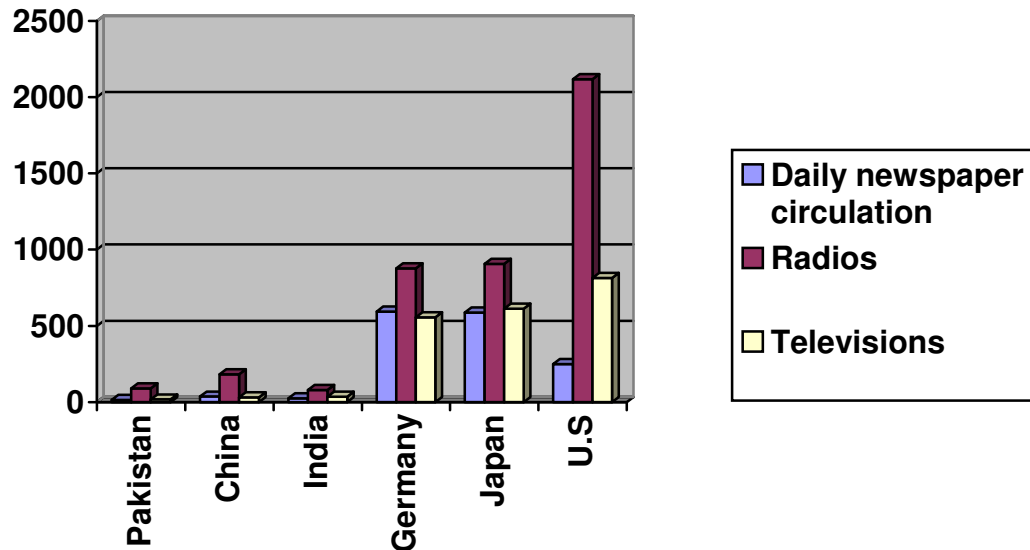
providing common experiences, which can change the world instantly, as was the case on September 11, 2001.

Given the massive social change that globalization entails, it is no wonder it stirs heated debates and provokes protests, which, ironically, happen to be global as well. However, is globalization a new phenomenon? Contrary to some opinions, globalization is not today's invention. Tehranian (1998) says "globalization is a process that has been going on for the past 5000 years." Even if this number seems somewhat farfetched, globalization can be traced back at least to the advent of the telegraph in mid-19th century, which not only helped send business information, but also transformed the entire newspaper industry. Fang (1997, 81) says that "with the telegraph the time that the news from New York took to be published in New Orleans dropped from more than ten days to one day." Not only did information travel faster, he says, but national and international news could be brought to local readers' attention before national newspapers came in the mail. Other changes included shortening news stories and cutting down on the number of correspondents in order to economize in a situation when telegraph companies were charging as much as 50 cents for ten words between New York and Boston.

The invention of the news agencies was another step to globalization, one that has left grave consequences for today's flow of information. The construction of the radio and television only accelerated the spread of information and systemic interconnectedness of various regions of the world. With the Internet, the world has really become a global village.

However, the vision of the global village has its limitations. Uneven access to information is the most obvious of them. In line with the 1970s knowledge gap hypothesis, due to advances in information technologies, disparities between the rich and the poor in terms of their access to knowledge and information are growing bigger rather than smaller, both within and between nations. A careful look at the Statistical Abstract of the United States proves only too well that billions of people and entire nations are excluded from the global village. While the average American citizen has over 2 radios, fewer than 2 Pakistanis in 1,000 own any radio at all. While daily newspaper circulation in Germany is 593 per 1,000 people, in Japan—687, and in the United States—249, the numbers for Pakistan, China, and India are 15, 37, and 26, respectively. The global village is clearly a Western concept and, largely, limited to the Western world.

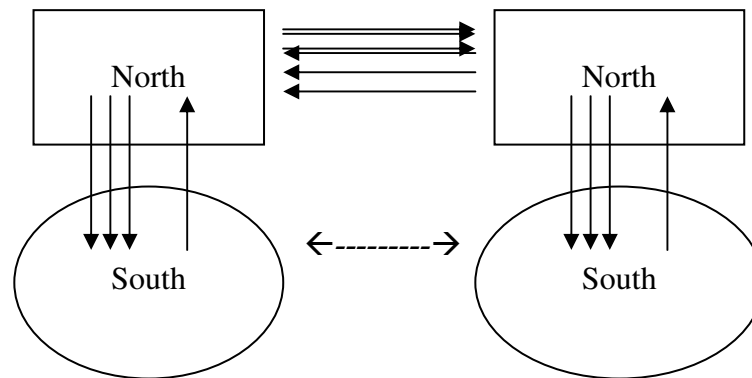
Figure 1. Media Distribution per 1,000 in Select Countries.



Source: Adapted from the Statistical Abstract of the United States, as quoted in Croteau & Hoynes, 1997, p. 318.

With uneven access comes unbalanced flow of information, or what Alleyne (1997) refers to as “uneven globalization.” The world’s major international news services—the United States’ AP and UPI, France’s Agence France Press, and United Kingdom’s Reuters have most of their correspondents in Western countries. More importantly, they are considered to have what is described as monopoly control over the flow of information from and to developing countries. As a result, the structure of global news flow is highly unbalanced, both quantitatively and qualitatively. For one thing, the quantity of information going from the richer, industrialized countries, located mainly in the Northern Hemisphere to the smaller, poorer states concentrated mainly in the Southern Hemisphere greatly exceeds the quantity of data going in the other direction. The same goes for the quality of information exchange between the North and the South. Also, while the flow between the northern countries is balanced and rich, the exchange between the southern countries is low and poor. Moreover, the peripheral countries are looking at each other through Western eyes, through their value systems and prejudices (Alleyne, 1997).

Figure 2. The structure of global news flows.



Source: Alleyne, Marke D. 1997. *News Revolution*, London: McMillan Press Ltd., p. 12.

Efforts to change this unbalanced structure date at least to the 1970s, when the so-called nonaligned nations expressed their disillusionment with what they considered to be a legacy of the colonial past, which was keeping their development at bay. Following in the suit of a similar resolution calling for "a new international economic order," which was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly, a 1976 nonaligned news symposium in Tunis called for "a reorganization of existing communication channels that are a legacy of the colonial past." The phrase later became known as "the new international information order" or "the new international information and communication order" (Barnouw, 1989).

Resolution 4/19 adopted by the Twenty-first Session of the UNESCO General Conference, Belgrade, 1980 considered that:

- a) this new world information and communication order could be based, among other considerations, on:
 - i) elimination of the imbalances and inequalities which characterize the present situation;
 - ii) elimination of the negative effects of certain monopolies, public or private, and excessive concentrations;
 - iii) removal of the internal and external obstacles to a free flow and wider and better balanced dissemination of information and ideas;
 - iv) plurality of sources and channels of information;
 - v) freedom of the press and of the information;
 - vi) the freedom of journalists and all professionals in the communications media, a freedom inseparable from responsibility;
 - vii) the capacity of developing countries to achieve improvement of their own situations, notably by providing their own equipment, by training their personnel, by improving their infrastructures and making their information and communication media suitable to their needs and aspirations;
 - viii) the sincere will of developed countries to help them attain these objectives;
 - ix) respect for each people's cultural identity and for the right of each nation to inform the world about its interests, its aspirations and its social and cultural values;

- x) respect of the right of all peoples to participate in international exchanges of information on the basis of equality, justice and mutual benefit.

The calls for the new international information order did not go unnoticed, but they did not revolutionize the international communication flow. In fact, the last two decades of the 20th century saw a decline in government regulation of the media, leading to immense corporate growth, the rise of international or transnational media conglomerates, and further monopolization.

The American model of broadcasting has always had a thoroughly commercial character that can be traced back to radio days when big private investors were awarded frequencies over public, educational applicants (McChesney, 1995). Reflective of its culture, the American model is based on the country's predominant values of individual initiative and economic freedom. Consequently, the U.S. television market is characterized by the domination of strong private networks and a marginal position of PBS, a public service broadcasting network formed by Lyndon Johnson as late as 1967.

However, the 1980s and 1990s saw an unprecedented series of changes in ownership patterns and regulation of the American media, culminating in the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The four major TV networks are now part of huge business conglomerates; media outlets are merging vertically and horizontally. Deregulating the system, the American government has encouraged further monopolization, conglomeration, and commercialization of the media. Consequently, the position of PBS has been subject to further marginalization.

These practices are not a uniquely American fetish. Although for most of the post-war period Europe regulated its own media as national monopolies, deregulation has now been applied in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe as well, bringing more changes in the international media landscape. The urge to merge has created transnational media conglomerates that are dominating the global cultural, political, and economic sphere (Płodowski, 2001a, 2001b).

Does it really matter? There are numerous reasons to believe these changes are not without consequences. For one thing, the appearance of global media products is accompanied by a concentration of ownership, which Croteau and Haynes call "the biggest paradox of globalization" (1997, 295). By being relegated to the role of passive consumers, vast majorities of world population feel marginalized. This, in turn, leads to social unrest and conflict, to say the least. Moreover, the regions of the world where poverty limits consumption are experiencing extreme frustration and marginalization when exposed to images of Western uninhibited consumerism.

Parallels to the colonial past come back in the form of accusations of cultural imperialism, a newer, more advanced, and sophisticated form of subordination. Not that the economic factor is absent from the cultural imperialism thesis. After all, central to this cultural process of influence is the idea of capitalism and

consumerism. But it is definitely subtler than political or economic oppression and, as such, more difficult to oppose.

Dominated by the visual arts, television, film, and mass advertising, the global cultural sphere is undoubtedly becoming more Western, more American, if you will. America keeps popping up in contemporary discussions of global processes, as it is America whose cultural artifacts have come to represent globalization and Western cultural imperialism. The self-evidence of global cultural products makes America an easy and obvious culprit.

But the ill effects of the global, market-driven, deregulated media of communications are not limited to international power relations. On the home front, issues of public service, citizenship, and engaged citizenry are at stake. Recent ownership changes highlight the bottom-line aspect of the media, which are first and foremost profit-making organizations. Evidence shows that in order to cut costs, news media resort to some or all of the following strategies (Croteau, Haynes, 1997, 52):

- 1) Decreasing the number of journalists,
- 2) Cutting back on long-term investigative reporting that produces a small number of stories,
- 3) Using a larger percentage of wire services reports,
- 4) At television stations, using video public relations segments (reports that have been prepared and provided free of charge by public relations firms) in newscasts,
- 5) Relying on a small number of elites (who are easy and inexpensive to reach) as regular news sources,
- 6) Focusing the news on preplanned official events (which are easy and inexpensive to cover) instead of less routine happenings,
- 7) Focusing coverage on a limited number of institutions in a handful of big cities.

The relationship between ownership patterns and journalistic standards may sound like a purely academic pursuit, but it is not. In a move that shocked the entire American newspaper industry in 2001, Jay Harris stepped down from the position of editor of one of the country's most successful dailies, the Knight Ridder-owned *San Jose Mercury News*. Faced with pressures to maximize profit margins at the cost of deteriorated coverage, he decided that the interests of readers and professional ethical standards take priority. This decision triggered a much-needed debate within the American media industry and, if nothing else, got him a spot as luncheon speaker at the ASNE conference a day after President Bush delivered his address. Yet those who decided to keep their jobs are facing this dilemma every day—increase the industry's operating margins, which went from 14.8% in 1990 up to 21.5% ten years later, or agree to cuts and layoff that they believe will damage their journalism.

As a result, caught off-guard by the 9/11 crisis, American television stations presented what Michael Massing, a contributing editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review*, called in his October 15, 2001 media analysis column "the thinness of coverage and the shallowness of the analysis." Massing says: "[it is] a direct outgrowth of the networks' steady disengagement from the world in recent years.

Since the end of the Cold War, foreign bureaus have been closed, foreign correspondents recalled, and the time allocated to international news sharply pared. Having thus plucked out their eyes, the networks—suddenly faced with a global crisis—are lunging about in the dark, trying desperately to find their footing.” One of the examples he gives is Barbara Walters’ talk with former Bush communications director, now senior White House counsel, Karen Hughes. Asked ‘why they hate us,’ Hughes offered this analysis: “They hate the fact that we elect our leaders.”

Research suggests that the media’s concentration on the game of politics rather than issues has created widespread dissatisfaction with political and public life (Bennett, 2000). By treating audiences as consumers rather than citizens the media are re-channeling people’s attention to “lifestyle pursuits and consumerism.” Increased business control of the media resulted in diminished levels of public service programming and lower quality and quantity of public affairs coverage. Instead, the audience is treated to more dramatized, entertainment-oriented, and personalized images of society and politics. This kind of programming does cut costs and maximizes profits, but the price to pay is increased cynicism about public life (Capella and Jamieson, 1997), and ever-lower levels of political engagement.

To be sure, the effects of media globalization are not entirely negative. Among positive developments, Herman and McChesney (1997, 8) list: energizing the sometimes stodgy public broadcasters into extending their services, carrying across the borders some of the basic Western values such as individualism, skepticism of authority, and to a degree, the rights of women and minorities.

The question of values and rights is a tricky one, though, since their evaluation is culture-specific—in their plurality the Chinese do not necessarily have to subscribe to the view that individualism is a good thing, which brings us back to cultural imperialism. But the cultural imperialism thesis has one more shortcoming—it seems to belong in the era of all-powerful media, rather than the contemporary, active audience perspective. After all, audiences make the text they “read” as much as the authors, filtering it through their own frames of reference and arriving at their own meanings. Thus, global media products do not, and will not, lead to the extinction of local cultures or to the ascent of global culture. Instead, they will help create hybrid cultures. Not that this is any consolation for the opponents of Western cultural influence.

Intellectuals are striving for the best model and/or metaphor to represent contemporary processes. As a term found across scientific disciplines, globalization offers helpful insight. For example, to Tomlison (1997) globalization is a decentered process. It is true—capital, labor, management, and information flow across borders to find the best environment to prosper. On the other hand, Galtung’s older vision of the world as consisting of one or two centers and the periphery still holds water in light of the world’s regions’ power inequalities. The picture is just not as static and permanent as it used to. Here the metaphor of postmodernism is helpful in explaining the shifting boundaries.

The post-cold war end of history thesis (Fukuyama, 1992) has seen its own end. In Poland, Fukuyama has always enjoyed higher esteem than in some other countries—Poles really wanted history “to end” with Poland becoming a democratic, free-market economy country. But even here Huntington’s vision (1996) seems to have taken over since September 11, 2001. Worldwide, it has come in for a considerable amount of criticism from various backgrounds. Experts claim that his depiction of Islam does not do justice to its internal complexity—there is no single Islamic civilization aiming to confront the West. The American left consider “talking about the clash of civilizations [...] a way of evading responsibility for the blowback that the US imperial projects have generated” (Johnson, 2001). On the other hand, the opponents of this view, including the American political right, classify opinions such as Johnson’s as idiocy and collect them for online display.

Criticized even by the press as simplified, or even simplistic (Hertzberg & Remnick, 2001), Huntington’s vision of the Clash of Civilizations still seems to acknowledge that there are inherent conflicts in the world and no process, be it Westernization, Americanization, or globalization, can remove them entirely. Whether located between cultures, ideologies, nation states, or civilization, the conflicts are there. Research shows that reporting of crucial international media events is to a large extent the result of political, cultural, and economic relations between the country covered and the country whose mainstream media produce the coverage (Płodowski, 2006, particularly Sarabia-Panol, Hughes & Arroyave, and Hamelink). One can only hope that modern mass media will work towards resolving rather than provoking the conflicts. After all, the use people make of their media is mainly a reflection of the prevailing climate of the times. As Neil Postman (1984) put it over twenty years ago, we have been “amusing ourselves to death,” substituting discussions of international political and social issues with trivial, image-based entertainment. The post-September 11 crisis offered as good an opportunity to change that as any.

Admittedly, hand-wringing over insufficient and falling levels of foreign news has its own history: following WWII, eight out of nine U.S. foreign correspondents were gone and the end of the Cold War brought another wave of foreign bureau closings. The new world of ICTs is a far cry from a situation where foreign information comes only from a select number of sources to a passive audience; the beginning of the 21st century sees fragmented and active audiences gather information on a variety of issues and topics, including foreign events, from a number of decentralized sources (Hamilton & Jenner, 2003). If the 2003 and 2005 World Summits on Information Society see some of their goals realized, we will be looking at a world where information flow is more balanced and yet more decentralized. Even if Moisy is right in arguing that news will eventually be aimed at and consumed by an elite (1996), having at least half the world’s population connected to ICTs and more fully participating in the global village will be a success. The *Global Media Journal* will be tracing transformations and challenges facing the world’s media, as ICTs develop and social dynamics change, and it will remain open to debate.

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