# THE MYTH OF MEDIA GLOBALIZATION

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# Kai Hafez

Translated by Alex Skinner

polity

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Most of us would be hard pushed to imagine a world in which the process of 'globalization' had fully run its course. Will de-territorialization reign supreme, while jobs as well as products of every kind become interchangeable across national borders? Will the political borders that separate human beings fall away and societies be linked comprehensively by the media? The future of globalization is unclear, much as the egalitarian 'communist society' once was, but the contemporary period is characterized by profound upheavals. Politicians use globalization to justify reforms of the state while the private sector makes people redundant to ensure its ability to compete globally. Just the right social climate, in other words, for a 'myth'. This myth 'banishes the unsettling strangeness of its object, but generally retains the fascinating ambivalence associated with the inexplicable'.<sup>1</sup> It mixes facts with exaggerated projections and, whatever its potential to inspire fear, entails a utopian promise of a better world - it would hardly exist in the first place if it did not.

We need to start looking at globalization as a myth that fuses truth and falsehood. It must be subjected to critical scrutiny to minimize the risk of politicians and others misusing it as an unfounded ideology. From the outset, the notion of globalization has rested on two pillars. Human economic-material and intellectual-communicative productive power has supposedly escaped the constraints of geographical, cultural and national borders. It is said to be universally and globally accessible. This requires new forms of private and public cross-border communication. Globalization thus entails the assertion that international media relations are growing in importance.

However, the realism of this assumption has not yet been satisfactorily established. The globalization debate is typified by a downright

anecdotal empiricism and by reasoning that inserts evidence and counter-evidence into visions of an allegedly globalized world from which there appears to be no escape. The anti-globalization movement also bears some responsibility for these visions. For regardless of differences of opinion about the advantages and disadvantages of a capitalist-driven globalization, 'optimists' and 'pessimists' share the same basic conviction, namely, that globalization is in fact taking place.

Both camps broadly agree that the symptoms of an Americanized global culture ('McWorld') and signs of cultural resistance in Asia, Africa and the Middle East ('McJihad') are reactions to the unstoppable advance of globalization. Everything in the world appears to be connected to everything else, for good or for ill. This 'network consensus' makes cross-border communication the core phenomenon of globalization. For while the opponents of globalization characterize it as an enormous culture annihilation machine working through the media, enlightened globalizers emphasize the advantages of cultural pluralism in a world in which world cultures can be accessed at will thanks to the Internet, satellite television and modern mobile telephony. In his big-selling introduction to globalization, All Connected Now, Walter Truett Anderson, for instance, claims: 'In a globalizing society, all the world's cultures become the property of all the world's people.'2 In this vision, more modest than the old notion of a universal culture uniting humanity, we can all remain as we are. The media allow us to understand what the other is like at any time. It is in itself entirely logical that this enlightened globalism is closely linked with the concept of 'Dialogue among Civilizations', which the United Nations elevated to its annual slogan for 2001. Yet this is exactly where the problem lies.

It was for long assumed that global interactions are increasing. In many fields of cross-border communication, this is in fact far less true than previously imagined. Media production and use are proving conservative cultural forces in many parts of the world. They are generating a reality which the 'globalization' approach struggles to cope with. What does it mean for example, if processes of cross-border communication on the Internet are increasing, but at the same time Internet traffic within national borders is growing far more rapidly? Does this make the Internet a 'global' medium or is it really a 'local' one? The existence of the technology of satellite radio and television is also a necessary but far from sufficient condition for global communication, for it tells us little about their actual reach and potential to change cultures and societies. How is one to interpret the fact that while nowadays a significant chunk of humanity has the technology to access foreign broadcasters at its disposal, it almost never makes use of it?

People refrain from engaging in global communication in this and many other ways. This is a far from trifling matter, for it casts doubt on the general concepts associated with globalization. How is the democratic 'public' to find expression at an international level? How is a global citizenry within a 'global public sphere' to have a debate about important issues of politics, social development and the environment, if the means of communication - the media - remain dominated by the nation and the state? In the field of so-called 'media diplomacy', how can transnational television networks bring a new, civil society element into international politics if there are no globally accepted networks and the only one which has ever played this role -CNN - has long since lost it? It would be simple to assume that the new Arab satellite television channels, such as al-Jazeera, provide vet more evidence that 'pluralism enriches globalization' and to point to the images which Western networks have borrowed from them. However, given the differences in these networks' world-views, one would also have to reflect upon whether CNN and al-Jazeera are not in fact merely the harbingers of an ever more divided media world, characterized not by more, but by ever less cross-border exchange.

The globalization debate has been marred by its almost exclusive focus on the 'new media' of the Internet and satellite television. We thus lack an overall appraisal of media globalization. The notion that the direct one-to-many or many-to-one communication of the epochmaking Internet would contribute to the 'end of journalism' has been proved wrong, as the growing literature on the 'myth of the Internet' lays bare.<sup>3</sup> People's media habits and how they organize their lives are not changing as radically as has frequently been assumed. In the field of international communication, traditional international reporting by the major national mass media continues to set the tone - above all during crises or wars. But what is truly global about international reporting within national media systems? When the New York Times apologized to its readers in May 2004 for its ill-considered acceptance of propaganda material produced by the American government during the Iraq War of 2003, this was seen as confirming the views of critics of war reporting. It was in fact far more than this. It was an admission that the 'global dialogue' of the media is in serious danger and that the media's political ties to their home countries are as strong as ever.

The question at stake today is nothing less than whether we have a functioning 'world communication system', allowing an undistorted

view of the world, or whether we will have one in future and under what circumstances. Getting to grips with this requires us to analyse the ownership of global media and to take stock of media policy in a global framework. Has the state really become obsolete? Do transnational media companies dominate the media systems of the world?

In their well-regarded book, Globalization in Ouestion, economists Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson argue that the changes in the global economy are far less drastic than the vast majority of protagonists in the globalization debate have claimed. Even internationally operating businesses, they point out, tend to have a clearly recognizable home base or at least strong regional linkages.<sup>4</sup> This places a question mark over the assumption that there are entirely 'transnational' firms ranging freely across the globe and underpins the authors' conclusion that globalization is largely a myth.<sup>5</sup> Is the transnationalization of economic processes, which is often confined to the OECD countries, mirrored in the technological, political and economic integration of the media? Does this mean that a new north-south global division is in the offing?<sup>6</sup> Indeed, is it not the case that even in the OECD countries political and economic interconnections in the media field continue to lag far behind other economic sectors because international communication is closely bound up with culture, language and tradition? Cars may be universal - but this applies only to a limited extent to news, film and music.

A revisionist scholarly debate has begun to scrutinize the basic assumptions which have held sway so far. In media studies, critical voices have existed since the early 1990s. Marjorie Ferguson<sup>7</sup> has argued against the notion of the mass media as sites of cultural harmonization or even the Western-style democratization of the world. Joseph Straubhaar<sup>8</sup> as well as Georgette Wang, Anura Goonasekera and Jan Servaes<sup>9</sup> and John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka and Stuart Cunningham<sup>10</sup> have underlined how national and regional media systems are rapidly becoming more complex and consolidated. Global models often serve as 'templates' for new media formats, but differences in content and culture persist. Claude Moisy<sup>11</sup> has shown that since the end of the East-West conflict the extent of international coverage in the media and the consumption of foreign media are declining rather than growing. In his opinion, this gives the lie to the notion of a 'global village' in which the media report everything and reach all the citizens of planet Earth.

Silvio Waisbord and Nancy Morris<sup>12</sup> have pointed to the astonishing ability of the nation-state to assert control in the media sector, even under conditions of globalization. Daya K. Thussu<sup>13</sup> has described

local resistance to global media empires. Colin Sparks<sup>14</sup> argues that the international and global use of satellite television has received far too much attention in academic circles, given that it has changed national consumption habits very little. While Anthony Giddens and others have propagated the notion that the era of the nation-state is at an end, James Curran and Myung-Jin Park<sup>15</sup> have warned against taking this for granted and making it the focal point of media analysis. Media developments beyond North America, Europe and Australia should, according to them, be paid more attention and integrated into theory building. Andreas Hepp, Friedrich Krotz and Carsten Winter advocate the globalization of media and cultural studies itself, its theoretical perspectives and research subjects.<sup>16</sup>

Such determinedly realistic and sceptical views receive little attention in the big disciplines of philosophy, political science and sociology, which set the tone for the globalization debate worldwide. Media and communication studies is a relatively small scholarly field. So far, it has been forced to watch more or less from the sidelines as the big subjects have 'expropriated' the concept of the media. To some extent, media research itself has also allowed itself to be infected by the euphoria of globalization, which appears to endow its own research object, the media, with such central cultural significance for the twenty-first century. In the wake of this maladaptation, media and communication studies still cling to naive concepts such as the 'global village', the 'networked society' or the 'glocalization of culture'. These are abstract models fundamentally resistant to description, measurement or confirmation by scientific means, which hinder rather than promote intellectual progress. Even within communication studies, it has been possible to claim, without provoking criticism, that countries and cultures are influencing each other culturally more than ever before,<sup>17</sup> that the integration of media systems has never advanced as rapidly and that the media's influence on politics has reached new heights.<sup>18</sup> But what is the evidence for this, and how can we measure other societies' influence on cultural change? This is all the more challenging if one takes into account the complex processes of indigenization and local adaptation which play a role in both the import of media and the construction of world-views within international reporting.

Again and again, attempts to systematize the field of globalization scholarship have shown a lack of empirical clarity and of a workable theoretical concept.<sup>19</sup> As far as empirical evidence is concerned, there are certainly 'harder' and 'softer' areas. It is a lot simpler to provide evidence of film exports than of cross-border media use. The cultural globalization of the entertainment industry seems more pronounced

than that of political communication. The interpretation of empirical evidence is however theory-dependent. One's estimate of the influence of elites on the development of societies, for example, will determine how one assesses the significance of the 'info-elites' which have congregated on the Internet the world over. This determines whether the cross-border Internet truly has a significant culture-changing effect.

If 'globalization' is degenerating into an 'all-purpose catchword', as F. J. Lechner and J. Boli fear,<sup>20</sup> then we need to attempt a rescue mission, because the world probably needs positive myths of this kind. Ultimately, the Millennium Report by the United Nations on the cusp of the twenty-first century made it clear that a large part of humanity continues to live in poverty and ignorance. The media are a potentially important instrument of development. The division between normative givens and facts on the ground is the next challenge if we are to get the project of globalization on a sustainable footing. Technophilia and fictional utopianism are 'out'. The hard graft of gathering empirical evidence, vital to producing robust social and cultural studies, is 'in', as is precise modelling.

The present work tries, through theoretical systematization, to help take stock of the most important aspects of cross-border mass communication. The subjects of study, alongside international reporting, satellite television and the Internet, include imports and exports of films for the big and small screen, international broadcasting and international media use by immigrants. Chapters on the development of media capital and cross-border dimensions of media policy complete the volume. The book presents the author's original research findings, some of which have been published in other contexts over the last ten years and some of which are new; it also gets to grips with the work of other researchers. Alongside the North American and European media systems, particular attention is paid to the situation in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

# 1

# Theory – Structural Transformation of the Global Public Sphere?

A clear theoretical model is vital if we are to take stock of the international and intercultural effect of media and forms of reporting of such different types as television, radio, print media, Internet, direct broadcasting by satellite, international broadcasting and international reporting. In the literature on globalization dealing with international communication, models of any kind are thin on the ground. Manuel Castell's famous three-volume work, *The Information Age*, does without almost any schematic models.<sup>1</sup> The same goes for multi-authored volumes in this field.<sup>2</sup>

The present work draws on systems theory to describe the globalization of mass communication. We may divide the key characteristics and conceptual tools deployed here into three fields:

- system connectivity
- system change
- system interdependence

Before discussing more closely the core concepts of 'connectivity', 'change' and 'interdependence' linked with the concept of system, it is vital to shed light on the frequently ambiguous concept of system itself. Cross-border communication is defined very unsystematically in the globalization literature, sometimes as inter- and trans*national* and sometimes as inter- and trans*cultural* communication. 'Cross-border' thus describes those processes of information exchange in the course of which system borders, of the nation-state *or* culture, are transversed. Almost all contemporary attempts to grapple with globalization theoretically that tackle issues of communication emphasize the nation-state or culture. The focus tends to be on the state, but

sometimes it is on cultural areas, at times also labelled 'civilizations'. The idea of 'networking' is anchored in the assumption that the world features a number of poles which can be networked; a web is ultimately nothing without its nodal points.

The notion of network-like communication between actors who can be ascribed to states or cultures is problematic. This is apparent when one considers that these poles of the system are in principle equal. They can be regarded as subsets of one another depending on the situation. States may be parts of cultures – and vice versa. The resulting web of communication appears to resemble the kind of optical illusion whose content changes as one changes one's perspective. When the Uighurs, a Muslim minority in western China of Turkmen origin and thus related to the peoples of Central Asia, use media from beyond the national borders, should we regard them as actors practising inter*national* or inter*cultural* communication?

Quite obviously, it depends which aspect of the analysis we wish to focus on. A web emerges consisting of several dimensions. These complications are rooted in the fact that 'state' and 'culture' involve differing implications for communication, each of which has its own justification. In one case, communication between actors describable in terms of constitutional law or sociology (governments, NGOs, etc.) takes centre stage. In the other, the focus is on exchanges between subjects and groups in their capacity as bearers of linguistically and historically imbued norms, ways of life and traditions. Both perspectives may be important, as is apparent wherever state and cultural borders are not identical and cultural identity rivals the power of the state. Tribal cultures in Africa, for example, often extend across state borders, highlighting the advantages of scrutinizing both the international and intercultural dimensions of cross-border communication processes.

The existence of cultural areas such as the 'West', the 'Islamic world', the Indian subcontinent and Latin or German-speaking Europe is an additional factor making analysis more difficult. Such areas gain cohesion across state borders only with the help of mass media, adding a third dimension of regionality to the theoretical model. A debate on globalization restricted to the 'local' and the 'global' while neglecting the 'regional' would lack complexity. The immigrant cultures that we hear so much about, which communicate across borders and form 'virtual communities', provide further evidence of the value of examining international and intercultural communication as a unity. The division into the spatial levels 'global', 'regional' and 'local', intended as a heuristic and relevant to both dimensions of state and culture, is not contradicted by migration. Immigrants also communicate either locally, regionally or globally, even if the spatial parameters are the reverse of those of settled populations, as their local culture (their home country) is, so to speak, located in global space and they can develop a second locality only slowly.

### System connectivity

Phenomena of system connectivity, sometimes called *interconnectedness* in the literature, describe the extent, speed and intensity of the international or intercultural exchange of information. Connectivity may be generated between entities, however defined, through various means of communication. Alongside mediated interpersonal communication (telephone, e-mail, letter, fax, etc.) we can distinguish the following fields of communication which depend on mass media (figure 1.1):

- (a) direct access to the range of communicative services produced by another country/culture (Internet; direct broadcasts by satellite; international broadcasting (special television and radio services in foreign languages broadcast to other countries); imports/export of media);
- (b) access to information and contexts in another country or cultural area conveyed by journalism (international reporting on television, radio, the press; corresponding media services on the Internet).

While this list makes no claim to completeness, it is clear that direct routes of access to cross-border communication are in the majority. One of the key factors shaping the globalization debate over the last decade was thus the fact that the number of means of transmission and the exchange of information beyond borders has increased dramatically. The 'new media' have set the overall tone of the debate since the 1990s, effectively distorting it, as the 'old media' have largely been ignored. In particular, the role of international reporting in the process of globalization has suffered a complete lack of systematic treatment. The technologically possible direct interleaving of national media areas, which people could previously experience only through the information conveyed by international journalism, has proven a fascinating and bothersome phenomenon for researchers.

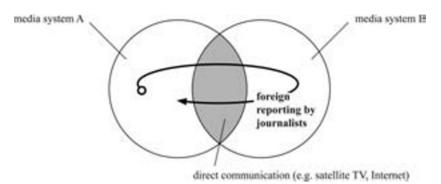


Figure 1.1 Forms of cross-border mass communication Source: author

However, it is far from certain that the new media, regardless of their many new forms, characterize the processes of globalization more than national journalism and international reporting. We therefore have to take both fields into account when designing our theories. Despite the rise of the new media and the mounting flood of information available on the Internet, the significance of journalism as intermediary has by no means diminished. Foreign media accessible via satellites and cables also represent a form of journalism, though one which arises outside of one's own media system. This means that the media user receives direct access to foreign journalistic cultures. Not only this, but the Internet has failed to oust even domestic journalism: journalistic mediation is in fact ever more significant to how people organize their lives at a time when the quantity of information is growing. If at all, online information services can replace the international reporting provided by national media only among small informational elites.

The concrete form of connectivity via the new media depends on a range of technological, socio-economic and cultural parameters:

Technological reach and socioeconomic implications of media technology.

The nation-states and cultural areas of this planet are characterized by very different technological capacities for transmission and reception in the field of satellite broadcasting, depending on the prevailing political and financial parameters. The same goes for the Internet. Regardless of the strong increase in the number of connections, a 'digital divide' exists, above all between industrialized and developing countries, which restricts connectivity substantially.

- *User reach.* The debate on the globalization of the media all too often fails to distinguish between technological reach and user reach. The number of those who use a technology per se lies below the technologically possible use and cross-border use is of course only *one* variant of the use to which the new media may be put. We cannot simply assume that it is the primary form. Our eagerness to wed globalization to a normative agenda should not blind us to the fact that the Internet may be a misjudged medium that is contributing far more to intensifying local connections (e-commerce, etc.) than to creating cross-border networks.
- Linguistic and cultural competence. To communicate with people in other states and cultural areas or to use their media generally requires linguistic competence, which only minorities in any population enjoy. To avoid dismissing cross-border connectivity as marginal from the outset, it is vital to distinguish between various user groups - globalization elites and peripheries. Connectivity is without doubt partly dependent on the nature of the message communicated. Music, image, text - behind this sequence hides a kind of magic formula of globalization. Music surely enjoys the largest global spread, and images surely occupy a middle position (for example, press photographs or the images of CNN, also accessible to users who understand no English), while most texts create only meagre international resonance because of language barriers. This issue is central to the evaluation of global connectivity as a more or less 'contextualized' globalization. Images in themselves do not speak. They require explanatory text to transport authentic messages - and it is questionable to what extent such messages can overcome borders.

Connectivity in the field of international reporting also depends on the international department's printing or broadcasting capacities, the quality and quantity of technical equipment and correspondent networks. All these resources have an influence on the presence of other countries and cultures in the media of one's own country. Foreign reporting has always been a struggle because of lack of resources, particularly in terms of staff and funding. Even the largest Western media have, for example, no more than one or two permanent correspondents in Africa, a continent with more than fifty states. CNN, seemingly the exemplary global broadcaster, has no more than a few dozen permanent correspondents.

International journalism should be seen as a virtual odyssey. More than domestic journalism, it struggles daily to reduce the mass of newsworthy stories from the two hundred or so states of the world to a manageable form. In principle, the notion of a world linked globally through the media assumes that different media systems increasingly deal with the same topics. Moreover, the lines of reasoning deployed in this process would also have to 'cross borders'. Homogenous national discourses, with their quite unique ways of looking at international issues, would increasingly have to open up to the topics and frames of other national discourses (which does not mean standardization of opinion, as this would involve a more advanced form of cultural change and the development of a global 'superculture', which is another issue).<sup>3</sup>

To increase the connectivity of the journalistic systems of this world, the resources available to the media are just as important as the linguistic and cultural competence of the journalists.<sup>4</sup> In some ways, the issue of the connectivity of journalism appears in a new light under conditions of globalization. While media may compete in destructive fashion as described above, multimedia collaboration may help improve the quality of each individual medium. The Internet as a source for journalism is surely the perfect example. Yet here too it is crucial to distinguish theoretically between *technologically possible* and *actually practised* use.

Connectivity may ultimately occur within global communication not only between producers and consumers in various nation-states and cultural areas – that is, *inter*nationally and *inter*culturally – but also via a *trans*national (or cultural) media system. Here, media and media businesses would no longer have a clear-cut national base, but would emerge as 'global players'. The idea of a world linked through communication is anchored in the assumption that globalization is more than the sum of the links between its components. The structure of the system underlying the global media landscape would change if new supersystems similar to the United Nations or large NGOs such as Greenpeace developed in the media field. The media are in principle also capable of transnationalization, so that alongside national systems networked with one another, a second global system might also arise (figure 1.2).

Contemporary notions of what such a transnational media system consists of are however still very nebulous. Apart from a few global agreements brought into being by the major transnational trade organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) (in the copyright protection field for instance; see chapter 8, p. 143), there are only a few transnationally active corporations which can be called 'global players' (see chapter 9). Regardless of the existence of such businesses, transnational media, that is, programmes and formats, are extremely rare. CNN, frequently mentioned as the perfect example of a leading global medium that encourages exchange of political

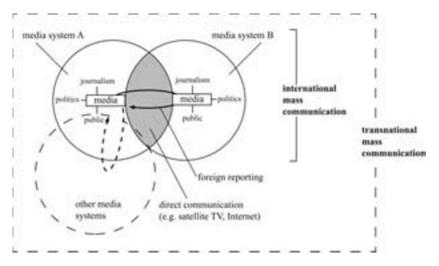


Figure 1.2 International and transnational media connectivity Source: author

opinion worldwide, by concentrating on transnational programmes, seems to come closest to fitting this vision. Yet even this case is problematic, for CNN is no uniform programme, but consists of numerous continental 'windows'. There are many 'CNNs', but no complete global programme. Through the proliferation of satellite programmes in the last decade, CNN has lost its elevated position and is now merely a decentralized variant of an American television programme, whose country of origin remains easily recognizable in its agenda and framing. CNN tends to be a mixture of characteristics of the American system and the target system of the specific window; it is thus at best a multinational but not a global programme.

For want of concrete role models, a transnational media system remains largely a utopia. Individual large national media systems such as the American or binational services such as the Franco-German broadcaster Arte can supplement but by no means replace their national counterparts. The transnational media field is still largely devoid of formal diversity.

#### System change

In the second theoretical field, the focus is no longer on grasping the extent and type of cross-border communication through mass media.