MEDIA GLOBALIZATION AND LOCALIZATION

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Contents

Summary

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have contributed to reshaping geopolitical realties on a worldwide scale, as centuries-long movements towards globalization of media have produced repercussions in the lives and experiences of individuals, social groups, and nations. The ever-expanding capabilities of media to preserve messages through time and to extend their influence across space have been used as part of empire-building strategies that depend on harnessing communications to achieve control and authority for a dominant way of life. Examples are the economic, political, and cultural systems of a colonial power, as it attempts to replace local forms of activity and expression that are targeted for "modernization."

In the contemporary era, these processes have led to the establishing of common systems of material and symbolic exchange that extend across national borders and operate increasingly on a global scale of significance and influence. Proponents of a global "information society" envision these developments leading eventually to economic, political, and sociocultural harmonization that will upgrade standards of living throughout the world. Informed critics warn of the dangers of cultural homogenization, the loss of multicultural distinctiveness, and the possibility of more deeply entrenched inequities in the distribution of the world's resources, as access to information becomes a form of "currency" that could further disadvantage less-developed countries (LDCs).

Utopian visions of how globalization should proceed need to be tempered by specific attention to the ways in which local forms of cultural expression can facilitate a more

participatory approach to the globalized, commercialized media environment now taking shape. The will and imagination to deploy powerful new tools of communication towards the betterment of local lives become ever more essential if media globalization is to succeed at achieving benefits for all the world's people.

1. Introduction

Much of contemporary thinking about local and global applications of communication media derives from a "modernization" paradigm that links sociocultural and economic development directly to societies' patterns of communication. According to this idealized model of social progress, professionalized forms of media production, typically organized for commercial purposes, play a legitimate, central role in advocating—even imposing—global standards of performance and conduct for application in local circumstances and conditions—including the realms of business, politics, culture, and interpersonal relations. A corollary claim has been that the relevant standards for media productivity and efficiency, as well as the norms for media professionals' sociopolitical influence, are those that have developed in Western, industrialized nations, especially in the world capitals that serve as headquarters to media industries that are now part of transnational corporations. A theory and practice of "development communication" has grown out of these premises, establishing its position since the 1960s onward as a discrete and distinct area of concern within communication studies. Analyzing the shifts and transitions within this tradition of communication research is a first step in understanding how local and globalized forms of media affect human communities. (See chapters *Traditional and Modern Media; History and Development of Mass Communications*.)

The theoretical basis for studying different forms of media has broadened during recent decades to include consideration of how media operate differentially within specific cultural settings. At the same time, a more detailed picture has formed of how media are able to extend information and knowledge by conveying communicative content across the natural and cultural boundaries of geographical space, and by preserving content throughout the passage of chronological and historical time. Acknowledging the importance of this space-time distanciation, and critically examining its impacts on a range of cultural circumstances, has led to more informed explorations of how development communication contributes to local realities, as well as to the prospects for advancing global, industry-based, media systems.

The revolutionary space- and time-spanning capabilities of new information and communication technologies combine with their polar tendencies both to establish and to challenge "monopolies of knowledge." Proponents of a global information economy tend to interpret these characteristics of the new media (see *New Media*) as promising a media-based future of international harmony and human betterment, either through market expansion or through the spread of technical–scientific enlightenment among the world's populations. (See *Economic and Technological Issues in Media.*) Thoughtful, critical commentators on these claims advocate a more participatory vision of future "knowledge societies," wherein particular communities are empowered to deploy technological advances towards the realization of locally defined aims and purposes. (See chapter *Communication Strategies for Sustainable Societies.*) This alternative

conception of a sustainable, participatory future for world media deserves increased awareness and support in an era when the expanding power and influence of globalized media industries poses threats to the viable role of local media organizations and practices in their indigenous cultural settings. (See *Communication Ethics for Sustainable Societies*.)

2. Can Global Media Support Meaning and Expression in Local Lives?

Conventional thinking about communication and media typically equates progress and improvement with ever-expanding technological capacity. Modern media are seen as the specific means by which individuals and societies are able to transcend the supposed limitations—economic, political, social, and cultural—imposed on small-scale, local ways of life. (See chapter *Evolution of Journalism and Mass Communications*.) Concentrating on the "distance-shrinking" capabilities of information and communication technologies, the presumption is that desirable new horizons of opportunity and experience will arise in remote and allegedly deprived localities only when the "tyranny of distance" that separates peripheral regions from cosmopolitan centers is successfully overcome. According to this analysis, advanced communications allow local aspirations to reach out beyond isolation and "underdevelopment," while global influences can progressively penetrate into localities where modernizing benefits are most needed and called for. (See chapter *International Communications and Media Networks*.) Communication and media are conceived as "carriers" of better ways of working, living, and interacting, through processes that allow desirable meanings, values, and products to be "diffused" from core areas of progress and civilization to peripheral areas in need of assistance, support, and guidance. (See chapter *International Communication and World Affairs*.)

This ideal of "modernization" has informed much of mainstream communication theory and practice, serving as an influential touchstone for understanding how global forces of change should be viewed in relation to the enduring regularities—some beneficial and stabilizing, others perhaps merely inhibiting—of local lives. A standard history of world communications emerges accordingly as a story of an expanding control over human knowledge, the commercialization of culture as a way of spreading freedom and choice, and the eclipsing of monopolies of knowledge through more democratic sharing of technologies and information. (See chapter *History and Development of Mass Communications*.) Proposed stages of economic, social, and political development are supposed to parallel corresponding stages of media growth and complexity. (See *Development Economics*.) Thus, a clear-cut path of "progress" is mapped out, from speech, to writing, to printed communications, to machines of mechanical reproduction, broadcasting, and ultimately computer-based information and communication technologies (ICTs). (See *New Media* and *The Internet as a Communications Medium*.)

This succession of innovations is thought to parallel a corresponding trajectory of advocated social "improvements" that include expanded population growth, increased industrialization, technically-defined education, and the institutionalized delivery of ever-"newly-improved" products and services. These features of modern life come to define the standards for individual and collective well-being. Core communicative features of societal modernization—for example, increasing capacity for information

storage and sharing; the spanning of space and time through media; a preserved view of the past and an encouraged understanding of the present as preliminary stages in a process of evolutionary growth; expansion of technological effectiveness in support of increasing numbers of people as a key to the future—all derive from the supposedly "iron law" that every stage of society has its appropriate state of communication.

From such modernizing premises, answers to fundamental questions about human progress seem to fall into place readily, and the steps towards a full-blown theory of how communication and social organization should unfold in tandem are readily identified by so-called development experts from industrialized nations. Proponents of this evolutionary perspective have considered the declared arrival of contemporary media at a globalized stage of development as a celebrated and auspicious accomplishment, a moment when the limitations of local ways of life promise to be transcended.

At the same time, this paradigm of modernization has come under intense critical scrutiny from scholars and activists who speak for the integrity of local cultures, by advocating reappraisal of the value of tradition in social life. Thoughtful critics of the universalizing picture of modernization have offered an alternative prescription that media should contribute to preserving significant features of the diverse patterns of traditional societies, particularly how their social and cultural processes contribute to the development of different political and economic systems and approaches. Because of this revised thinking, the established dichotomy of local versus global media, along with a related contrast of traditional versus modern society, is increasingly questioned. (See chapter *Government and Governance in the Network Age: Can Cyberspace Really be Regulated?*)

Many commentators on the future of media development now challenge the authority of quantitative, globally-established norms that were formerly applied to individual localities—for example, ten daily newspaper copies, twenty radio sets, and two cinema seats per 100 people. (see chapters *Magazines; Motion Pictures; Newsletters, Newspapers, and Pamphlets*; *The Development of Radio;* and *The Evolution of Television*.) Abstract guidelines are replaced by a "situated" understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic realities of specific communities. The required level of detailed understanding results from awareness that media development for each country has to reflect that country's unique needs, which are always related to distinctive circumstances of climate, history, culture, and social conditions, as well as human, natural, and technological resources.

The question emerges of whether contemporary patterns of media globalization that are demonstrably underway can support local expression, culturally-determined values, and communicative autonomy while also affording benefits associated with increased interconnectedness between people of diverse locales and regions. The historical context and the distinctive characteristics of communication media—local and global—need to be appreciated in order to address this crucial question thoroughly, and with critical awareness of the rich opportunities and the tangible threats associated with contemporary globalizing movements in the development of world media.

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Biographical Sketch

Wayne Woodward received a Ph.D. in communication from the Institute of Communications Research of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research focuses on applying perspectives from American cultural studies, especially pragmatism, to contemporary issues in communication theory and philosophy. He teaches in the areas of organizational communication and public relations, drawing upon experiences from a twenty-year career as writer, producer, and project director in the fields of public relations, publications production, and marketing. His interests in local and global media grow out of the commitments to dialogue, participatory communication, and critical commentary on media development that are part of the cultural studies tradition.