



DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD FOUNDATION

What Next?

Draft thematic paper

What next in media and communications?

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What happened?

It has often been said that the concept of globalisation¹ is not new, it is at least as old as European colonialism. Early Portuguese and Spanish explorers set the pattern of exploration, conquest and control over raw materials as well as the diffusion of culture, religion, and technologies of communication that was to follow in the coming centuries.

What is new is the pace at which global empire building is progressing today. Advances in science and technology, especially accelerated innovations in information, communication and transportation have made globalisation much more pervasive and its impact unprecedented.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have played an important part in the process of both economic and cultural globalisation. For this reason, academics and other analysts probing the impact of this process on national economies and cultures have tended in the past decade to focus on the ownership, control and influence of the global media. This discourse reached a crescendo with the rapid spread of the Internet, satellite television and global multimedia. Today the media discourse focuses on how content is affected by infrastructure, corporate ownership and the convergence of technology. There is also a vibrant debate on how much and in what way the media affects behaviour and consumer patterns worldwide.

The debate on the ownership and impact of the global media has been raging long before the current discourse on economic and cultural globalisation. Concern about media control predates the advent of Internet and satellite communications. In fact, the issue of media control and ownership has been a part of the discourse in North-South relations from the Cold War period. The axes of those discussions, however, were not limited to North-South debates but encroached on East-West relations as well.

In the 1970s, the countries of the South broached the idea of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) as an alternative to the control of news and information by the North. The Western, meaning United States and Western European, monopoly of the production and distribution of both news and entertainment was widely criticized even then. The notion of 'cultural imperialism' as distinct from economic forms of control was fashionable among the intellectual and political elite in what was then still called the Third World².

Countries in the South acutely felt then that the Western definition of 'news' and the coverage of the 'Third World' by wire services based in the United States or former colonial powers was negative, condescending, and unsympathetic to their efforts to raise economic productivity and lead their

¹ We use the term globalisation to refer not only to economic aspects but also the cultural and other aspects of the globalisation phenomenon, including the diffusion of new ideas and technologies of communication.

² A rather imprecise term coined during the Cold War by the First World countries (those with 'modern' capitalist market-oriented economies – North America, Western Europe and Japan), which referred to countries with a limited industrialization and a low per-capita income that were not part of the Second World – the Soviet Union.

countries to modernity. Western news coverage, they believed, was biased and stereotyped, and reduced complex economic and social issues to tired formulations on poverty, corruption and political instability. The countries of the South were particularly aggrieved that the news they read about other 'Third World' countries was filtered through a Western lens, as there was no source of information apart from the Big Four news agencies (AP, Reuters, UPI and AFP) that monopolised the coverage of world news.

Southern politicians and intellectuals also noted the propensity of news agencies to report mainly on coups, disasters and bizarre or strange events, thereby promoting an image of the South as a place of natural calamities and political catastrophes. Such coverage failed to enlighten Northern audiences about the various facets of Southern issues and concerns. Instead the reportage led to either simplistic notions that the 'problems' of the Third World could be solved by pouring in more aid or to prejudiced views that the South was hopeless territory about which nothing much could be done.

These grievances were brought to the United Nations, especially UNESCO, meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement and other 'Third World' gatherings. Charismatic (including some autocratic) 'Third World' leaders of the period decided to set up their own national news agencies and alternative international news exchanges. Their goal was to disseminate positive news about their countries worldwide through coverage that came to be called 'development journalism'.

The United States government, led by conservative think tanks, launched a campaign to discredit both UNESCO and the non-aligned initiatives as an effort to curb the free flow of information. However, the members of the Non-Aligned Movement, although united by their opposition to western dominance of the media, were then in diverse stages of economic development. They were ruled by a variety of government structures and had inherited varying domestic traditions of press freedom. The Non-Aligned News Pool therefore produced a hodge-podge of news items, including government propaganda and positively angled news and features from member states. At the same time, Third-World-oriented news agencies like the Rome-based Inter Press Service and the London-based Gemini made valiant and laudable attempts to correct the news imbalance by producing well thought out features that explained and analysed Southern problems from a Southern perspective.

By the late 1980s, though, the notion of a NWICO was running out of steam just as the media was becoming even more global with the advent of satellite television, cable, computers and the early inroads of email and the Internet. In hindsight, some lessons can be drawn from the NWICO debate. These lessons are still relevant now, when the ownership of the media is more concentrated and the control of the global communications infrastructure more centralized than 20 years ago. Some of these lessons are:

- Although it took place during the Cold War, the NWICO debate was needlessly polarized and created unnecessary bad blood.
- Both sides of the debate were manipulated by the two superpower blocs and their ideologies.

- The universal rules of journalism – free speech, objectivity and independence – were discarded to score points in the political arena.
- Toward the late 1980s, proponents of the NWCIO failed to grasp the opportunities provided by ICTs to leapfrog to a truly decentralized and non-commercial use of the new technologies.
- The NWCIO debate was hijacked by ‘Third World’ dictators and used as a front for retooling national media for self-serving propaganda. The need to support independent media in the South was overlooked. While civil-society initiatives to correct the news imbalance fared better, these did not have much of an impact in the increasingly market-oriented mainstream media in both the North and the South.
- The NWCIO debate failed to link Northern and Southern concerns about media ownership and public service media. This failure to reach a global consensus on the importance of pluralistic and public service-oriented media in both the North and the South was unfortunate. Because of this, the emergence of the supranational entities that today control the media was not sufficiently opposed nor were their reach and power tamed. Thus, the global media giants that rule today are a far cry from those of 40 years ago: their reach is more pervasive, and they are even more obsessed with super profits and more grossly negligent of the media’s public service role in promoting diversity, pluralism and democracy both within countries and globally. After September 11, there has been a trend toward the consolidation of neo-conservative control of the mass media, a process which has undermined press freedom even in some Western democracies.

What is happening?

By the 1990s, the ICT revolution was already transforming the way people, especially in the West, were communicating and getting information. The early euphoria about the non-commercial use of cyberspace, of globally democratic bulletin boards, and the belief that ICTs would somehow dramatically level the playing field between the haves and have-nots soon gave way to a more realistic assessment of the potentials and limitations of the new technology.

To begin with, the convergence of television, computers and telephony presented business opportunities that were too lucrative for the global corporate giants to ignore. Convergence was reflected in the ownership patterns of the new media: mergers between traditional media corporations and Internet companies, the marriage of content providers and Internet Service Providers and browsers, and mergers among all of these and international telecommunications corporations. In fact, the digital revolution encouraged such mergers, as multimedia convergence made possible not only economies of scale but also economies of scope, which only served to further limit competition.

The oligopolistic control of infrastructure within the Internet–television–telephone combine has a profound impact on content. Global news became even more Western-oriented, as did the products of the global culture industry, including books, documentary films, art, music, etc. The new technologies only made Western content even more widely—and efficiently—distributed through

a range of many more media than was imaginable in the past. As a result, culture was no longer just the product of a society's endogenous creativity. "Culture" was now a global industry selling a range of commodities to a global market. Moreover, the control of both media content and the channels of communications by global multimedia giants was even more concentrated now than in the 1970s.

Unsurprisingly, this has led to a resurgence of the old NWICO arguments, this time encrusted in the bed of the anti-globalisation discourse. The original premises of the old arguments — that the monopoly of U.S. and European media conglomerates ensured that the Northern perspective dominated the news and did not sufficiently give voice to the South and that such monopoly crowded out Southern issues and concerns — became, in a media-inundated environment, even more relevant.

Critics were quick to note that the imbalances in media ownership and control reflect global economic inequities. As a result, the global news industry gives disproportionate weight to news and information that concern the rich and the powerful. Just as the proponents of the NWICO used to argue, it is still true that a typhoon in the Philippines that kills hundreds gets less air time and news space than a minor political scandal in London or Washington. It is also still true that the global media conglomerates frame reports on hunger and poverty in the South as largely stories of the incompetence or corruption of Southern elites, rather than also the result of unequal terms of global trade and inappropriate technologies. As before, global environmental problems are rarely blamed on over-consumption in the North. Thus, the global news media today regularly churn out alarmist reports that rising incomes in India and China now enable more people there to buy cars, thereby contributing to global environmental degradation, but rarely do these reports challenge the car-based lifestyles in the North.

Then, as now, reports that challenge the orthodox beliefs of Northern elites are rarely given play in the global media. Moreover, societies of the North — with their obsession with individual freedoms and high-consumption lifestyles — are still portrayed as the models to which poor Southern countries should aspire.

But much more than in the 1970s, the media content now is increasingly ratings-driven. The global media produces for the global media market a range of entertainment-driven, mass-consumption media products. The global media industry is huge, with a 24/7 (24 hours a day/7 days a week) market. The result is assembly-line news that caters to the lowest common denominator and sacrifices depth for speed and content for glitz.

In addition, the news and culture industry, much more than in the past, propels global consumerism. The global media has helped transform the world into one big advertising market. Media critics therefore point to the insidious impact of the global media. Beyond distorting news and information, the global media also peddles values and lifestyles through both hard-sell advertising and subliminal messages to global consumers. The global media therefore plays an ideological role, by projecting the attractiveness, hence superiority, of high-consumption Northern lifestyles and seducing global consumers with the promise of the attainability of these.

Today, news- and information-providers are not just broadcasting through television news bulletins, but are also available in live streaming video or radio through the Internet. The wire services don't have the same relevance they once did, and have increasingly specialized in business news and providing content for multimedia channels. Despite this, not much has really changed in the past 30 years, since the raw information and news are still filtered through Western prisms. There may be no overt censorship and no deliberate attempt to instil bias, but the Western slant comes from the selection not so much of what is regarded as important for readers and viewers around the world to know, but of what will sell. Because information providers are as commercially driven as any other business, the business of news is to make money, not so much to inform or to enlighten.

In the 1970s, the market also determined news content. For this reason, the Big Four news agencies sold event-driven news. The selection criteria for spot news were quite simple: news is whatever is out of the ordinary, the negative, and it has to happen suddenly. Slow change and trends don't make news, context is not news, there is no time to explain, interpret and analyse. This formula was unsuitable to address the problems of global poverty and inequity 30 years ago. The formula, however, endures, even if it is even more unsuitable today when the world has become more complex and interrelated, the global environment is even more threatened, and global inequity is deeper and more profound.

Today the problems of global poverty and disenfranchisement are having a political backlash. Terrorism, illegal mass migration, and racism are not happening in isolation. Global consumption patterns have not changed much. Industrial lifestyles continue to be the root cause of a planet-wide environmental crisis of climate change, species extinction, habitat destruction, over-exploitation of natural resources and socio-cultural disintegration. Prosperity and poverty have combined as never before to threaten human survival. The global media as it exists today — with its concentration of ownership in corporate hands and an entertainment-dominated culture industry that turns citizens into passive consumers — is not geared toward bringing about change. Fixated on profit-making and product-selling, the global media has abdicated its public-service role.

This has tragic consequences. When the global media does not adequately address the long-term problems of poverty and over-consumption, the international consensus needed to find solutions also becomes more elusive. The global media therefore fails in its role as an early warning system. With the existing news paradigm, the world only finds out about a disaster after it has happened. This deficiency is most glaring in political reporting of hotspots around the world, where Iraq or the hunt for Osama eclipses all other brewing crises.

Press freedom may be guaranteed and the independence of the media respected, but modern commercial news media practice what John Pilger calls “the journalism of exclusion”. By excluding from the news menu anything that is not palatable, not appealing, not interesting to a majority of readers and viewers, news is trivialized, dumbed down and made entertaining. Pilger calls this “omission on a grand scale, the repetition of received truths, and the obfuscation of causes”.

Danny Schechter, writing in *The More You Watch, the Less You Know*, says: “As globalization restructures the world economy and uses the media as its global marketing arm, there is less, not more, coverage of global trends. As global news becomes more important, it is covered less. There is half as much international coverage on the broadcast networks as there was ten years ago.” Schechter is talking about the United States, but since so much of the international media operates on the same principles, it is a global issue too. Things have improved slightly after the second Iraq War, but US coverage of world events is dominated by one or two stories on the fashionable hotspot of the moment. Most everything else is blotted out.

This is because the corporate values and structures that drove the industrial revolution are the same ones that are driving the information revolution. The gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” has been replaced by a gap between the information-rich and the information-poor. As in the past, the single-minded rush for profits has created new inequities and fresh sources of deprivation. Thus, those monitoring the ICT revolution speak of the “digital divide.”

There was always a global analog divide, so there is really nothing new about the digital divide. Since not enough has been done to address the literacy divide, the health-care divide, and the poverty divide, then it is inevitable that there will be inequities in ICT between the North and South and within countries. It has become fashionable in some circles to zero in on the digital divide, as if bridging that gap would somehow resolve all the other structural problems that perpetuate global poverty and inequity.

By the late 1990s, it had already become evident that despite its initial promise, the ICT revolution was not going to provide redress to the problems of inequity, eradicate poverty, or even make the world a better-informed place. Even if the technology were accessible and affordable to a vast majority of the world’s people, it was clear that more information would not necessarily lead to economic progress and social well-being. Information does not always bring knowledge. A lot depends on the quality of information: is it relevant, is it useful, does it inform and educate, will it help make the world a better place? Sterile facts and figures do not suffice. Citizens need information that can help them make sense of their country and of the world, that allows them to understand the problems facing their community, their nation and the planet, and that enables them to take action. Knowledge is information that empowers and enables. The modern world should therefore be not just an information society, but a knowledge society.

These words by the Malaysian president of the UN General Assembly, Razali Ishmael in 1996 sound uncannily similar to the speeches from the NWICO debate of another era: “Today’s television environment enlarges choices, creates opportunities for diversity and promotes a freer flow of information. However, (this) would be a distortion of empowerment were it to be restricted within the doctrine of consumerism, or pre-packaged by power elites. Information technology that spans the globe can concentrate ownership, limit access, homogenize content, and pit freedom of expression against certain minimum standards.”

In the North, new information technology has turned largely into a purveyor of mass entertainment but in large parts of the world, the availability of relevant information can still be a question of life or death. There have fortunately been instances when the media was on the side of life. A Nepali mother who does not know that diarrhoea leads to dehydration and fails to replenish body moisture may lose her child. She needs to first be aware before she changes her behaviour. Decades of radio dramas, jingles and messages about diarrhoeal dehydration and safe drinking water have led to a dramatic drop in Nepal's average infant mortality rate. This is the kind of knowledge that enables. But knowledge alone does not suffice. Mothers may know what causes diarrhoea, but unless they have regular access to safe drinking water, they may not be able to adequately protect their children from the illness. In this instance, mothers demanding safe water put pressure on government to speed up programs that supply clean water to distant villages. Luckily, the voices of rural women and men are being amplified by the spread of community radio throughout Nepal. It is not state-of-the-art satellite-based communication technology that has empowered them, but old-fashioned, analog radio.

Similarly, for the longest time, the lack of satellite data warning of an approaching cyclone used to kill hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi coastal dwellers in tidal surges. Today an early warning system through the mass media and the construction of shelters save many lives annually. (These things don't make headlines because saving lives doesn't make news.) In December 2004, the need for such a warning system was dramatically demonstrated when massive tsunami struck several countries in the Indian Ocean, killing hundreds of thousands of people. In these countries, the lack of tsunami information and of an early-warning system was largely responsible for the huge casualty count.

If domestic media can be effective at the local level in raising awareness and changing behaviour, the global media should theoretically be as effective in changing international public opinion in favour of appropriate responses to global challenges. Global media, for example, provided dramatic coverage of the devastation caused by the Indian Ocean tsunami. The reportage on the disaster showed the need for immediate aid, and countries and citizens around the world responded with an unprecedented outpouring of generosity. The setting up of a tsunami warning system was also fast-tracked as a result, with the resources for such being made immediately available. Many people might also identify more appropriate responses to the looming ecological disasters if they were better informed. Individuals and societies, therefore, need first to be aware of climate change, depleted fish stocks, growing global poverty and inequity, the lack of fair trade, the underlying causes of migration and terrorism before they can act to reduce risks. Knowledge and information are the precursor to action. Governments often take action only when prodded by public opinion or citizen outrage. But the public itself cannot make informed and realistic demands unless it is knowledgeable about the issues.

For sure, an informed public is a requisite for informed public debate and informed politics. Governments cannot be held accountable nor will they tend to act responsibly in their country and in the world without vigilant publics. A parochial, insular media promotes an inward-looking and narrow-minded polity. But information alone does not suffice. Governments, corporations and big multilateral institutions now wielding so much power are often resistant to

change. They are also masters of obfuscation, and have vast media resources at their disposal. For this reason, the orthodox views of the powerful prevail in the media.

US media critic, Ben Bagdikian, said in 1996: “The record of the media reporting the most important issues facing America—and indeed the human race—is not encouraging...A very low priority is given to news which affect the rest of the world.” This was before 9/11, which led many Americans to wonder: “Why does the rest of the world hate us so much?” The post-9/11 coverage of world events in the US media may have quantitatively improved, but it is also obsessed with the ‘war on terror’ and body counts, and is even more jingoistic than ever before. This would not be of such great importance were it not that how America lives and what its leaders decide have a profound impact on the rest of the world.

In the U.S. and elsewhere, supranational media giants are raking in unprecedented profits, even as they shirk their responsibilities to inform and enlighten. Despite the high hopes that came with it, the ICT revolution has failed to democratise media ownership and force media companies to be more socially responsible. This is because corporate values are embedded in ICTs and the patterns of ownership and control of information technology and dissemination are the same as they were 30 years ago. Global media companies and their affiliates adhere to these values and set the pattern for smaller media firms around the world which are enamoured with mimicking and propagating a US-style, media-driven mass consumer culture.

The phenomenon of economic globalisation is inextricably linked to the control of information technology by big corporations. Technology is never value-free, and international media therefore reflects in its content the business and political concerns of the global free market value system. Just as economic globalisation has concentrated power in a few rich and powerful countries, technological innovations in media and communications have resulted in the consolidation and concentration of media ownership. Edward S Herman and Robert W McChesney predict in *The Global Media*: “By the logic of the market and convergence, we should expect that the global media oligopoly will gradually evolve into a far broader global communication oligopoly over the next several decades.” Throughout the world, the most powerful media companies are monopolies or oligopolies, controlling a whole range of media businesses ranging from television and film to newspapers and book and Web publishing. Increasingly, these firms are involved in other non-media businesses as well.

The medium, therefore, is still the message because the medium is a business. In the ICT age, the global media has emerged as a purveyor of the products of the global culture industry. Films, music, books, and other forms of creative work have become commodities like any other, designed, manufactured and packaged so they can be sold in the global marketplace. The economics of this industry mean that the profits are made by maximized duplication and spread of the product itself and ancillary merchandising. This is true for all products of the media industry: soap operas, Hollywood movies, DVDs, music videos, CDs, video games, books, newspapers and magazines.

Most newspapers are now managed by the market, ownership is concentrated so they are just another unit in a chain of periodicals owned by a corporate house whose main business is not even media anymore. This model is now being replicated in countries around the world where once-respected national broadsheets or magazines have been forced by competition to either go under or turn into tabloids to compete.

Global corporate boardrooms that decide on media content and values have their counterparts in regions and within countries. There are media barons in Brazil, Mexico, India and Thailand as well as in Italy, UK and Sweden who work on the same principles as the global giants, and the only reason they may be more benign is because their market is domestic.

What if?

Despite the gloom and doom, ICTs by their very nature provide many openings for resistance and change. The growth and spread of the technology is so rapid that audiences, technologies and tools fall between the cracks and are free, accessible and outside the control of the goliaths.

Everywhere we look, there is evidence of centripetal forces that pull the world from the periphery to the centre toward more concentrated control and centralization. But as the earth's information sphere revolves, there are also centrifugal forces that push us outward, away from the gravity of the centre, to the periphery where there is space for reflection and creative action. Here, in the weightless freedom of the Internet and multimedia, ICTs present possibilities for citizens, civil society organisations and independent media to use the technology to make it more responsive to the needs of the poor and powerless. The inherent anarchy of the Internet and its decentralized nature make it ideal as a tool for resistance. Today the World Wide Web is home to feminists, anarchists, liberation movements, environmentalists and all sorts of groups with all sorts of causes. The Internet's relative freedom from control allows small, under-funded and virtually unknown groups to have a global presence. In the last two decades, those resisting power have used new information and communication technologies in their struggles. In 1998, student activists fighting the Suharto regime in Indonesia used email to coordinate nationwide protests. In 2001, Filipinos mobilized large crowds to rise up against a corrupt president by using mobile phones. The Zapatista rebels of Mexico have used the Internet and global media as a platform for their cause. In addition, members of what is now known as "global civil society," which organized anti-WTO protests like that which shook Seattle in 2000, continue to organize and consolidate its ranks through email and the World Wide Web. In truth, global civil society was made possible in part by global media and communications.

Sometimes, in the thickets of cyberspace we catch a glimpse of the world as it could be: with decentralized controls, the possibilities of bypassing officialdom in countries where the press and societies are muzzled, of providing edifying local-language content, of media pluralism and the promotion of a global consciousness through programmes to protect the earth's biosphere by changing lifestyles and reducing consumerism.

The Internet, mobile SMS, cable and satellite, as well as digital radio offer new ways to bridge the digital divide and democratise access to information and make it available to the grassroots. All around the world, there are examples of poor communities who have benefited from the new technologies. In Bangladesh, peasant women use mobile phones to get the latest prices for their produce so they bargain better with middlemen. In rural Cambodia, poor patients get medical consultations online through mobile computers and satellite phones carried by technicians on board motorcycles. Some of the new technologies have dramatic and widespread use, as with cell-phone texting in the Philippines (where one in every two adults owns a mobile phone) and community radio via the Internet in Indonesia. Technology-savvy communities, grassroots groups and governments have been able to exploit the possibilities of ICTs to set up new networks that promote democracy and make possible alternative paths to development. Wherever they have succeeded in democratising information use and access, ICTs have disseminated relevant information to wide publics and enabled users to bypass official controls in countries where information is restricted. In Malaysia, for example, Internet newspapers provide uncensored information not available in the mainstream press owned by groups closely linked to the government. In China, the Internet has provided a forum for a range of views and allowed users a glimpse of democracy in a one-party communist state.

As Herman and McChesney wrote in their 1998 book, *The Global Media*, even though the egalitarian potential of ICTs is being undermined by global media empires, “the nature of the communications system that the media giants dominate is in the midst of sweeping change, introducing new players, new possibilities, stunning technological developments, and considerable instability”. The dot com crash of 2000 and the bursting of the bubbles on Internet companies have sobered the early expectations of huge windfalls in the virtual reality of cyberspace. And ironies and contradictions abound: as noted above, even the global solidarity against economic globalisation would not be as easy to organise without the same ICTs that the anti-economic globalisation activists rail against.

Media academia is divided between the pessimists of the Frankfurt School who see ICTs just as an extension of a hegemonic culture industry that produces cultural commodities for the mass market and the optimist Internetphiles who see the Web as modern versions of the Greek agora where democracy was born. The mainstream development set sees ICTs as a means of promoting human progress by leapfrogging technology and allowing distance learning, grassroots communications, and cheaper and more efficient access to development communication. Activists are divided between these points of view, with some of them heralding the democratic potentials of the Internet, while others see it as just another arena where corporations will eventually rule. An assessment of the academic debate by the Goldsmith Media Group concludes: “In the absence of a consistent and more vocal radical critique, positive technological determinism has been winning the day...governments, corporations, special interest groups and individuals have thus been placed on a more level playing field in which all may gain access to information and debate and no single entity may gain exclusive control.”

Some media scholars and critics wonder whether the playing field is indeed level. The digital divide remains deep and entrenched globally and within

countries. In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, more than 90 percent of the population has never made a telephone call in their lives, whereas for the elite within those countries as well as residents of industrialised countries, access to high bandwidth Internet is now a utility as common as electricity and water. But the digital gap is not uniform worldwide: South Korea now has Internet-user rates higher than those in the United States and Japan, Singapore has high-speed data lines in almost every home, Malaysia's Multimedia Supercorridor is a symbol of that country's strategy to leapfrog to the information age. The architect of this plan was former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, who once said: "ICT is like a tiger, if you don't ride it, it will eat you up."

The two other Asian giants, China and India are also trying to catch up but the sheer size of their populations, their geographic spread, and the huge investments needed for telecom infrastructure have meant that progress is slower than in smaller countries. Still, India's 'Silicon Plateau' in Bangalore and the software centre in Hyderabad (now called 'Cyberabad') are icons of a country that has hitched its wagon to the information revolution's need for software and is generating huge revenues from it. China, on the other hand, has focused on hardware and now makes most of the world's computer components.

Still, most analysts now agree that the Internet has gone the way of previous commercialised media, especially as the technology that drives it is firmly in the control of Western conglomerates, and it may be too late to rescue it from market determinism. Despite this, some, like Korinna Patelis of Goldsmiths College, are still urging a radical reconceptualisation of the Internet. She writes: "The Internet could be more than a delivery platform. It could also be more than a digital vehicle for individual use and gratification...a public-service net is needed to reverse the current commercialisation trends."

Indeed, this could be said of the traditional media as well, especially television, whose public-service role is being increasingly challenged by market forces. Many voices—including those of media critics, grassroots activists, and members of the public—are now being raised about the need to reassert the public-service roles and duties of the media. The logic of the 'free market', which in the media industry has given rise to media monoliths and monopolies, is now being seriously challenged, even by those writing and commenting for mainstream press and television. The decline of network television in the U.S. is one indication that the audience may be tuning out of the pap that is served daily on TV. At the same time, the still significant audiences that watches public-service television in Europe is an assurance that public-service broadcasting remains very much alive and presents a viable, alternative model of media ownership and social responsibility.

Besides the Web, the other segments of the globalised media that opens up arenas of resistance and creativity are satellite television and radio. Mobile phones, which in some countries are cheaper to get access to than the Internet (which requires a computer), have also been used as tools of popular mobilisation and protest. In 2001, Filipinos used their phones to send text messages that encouraged others to take part in rallies, spread the latest news, raise awareness about issues not tackled well in the mainstream media, and even to relay jokes about a corrupt president. It is widely acknowledged that mobile phones were responsible for mobilising hundreds of thousands to take part in

the four-day popular uprising that ousted the corrupt President Joseph Estrada in January 2001. The speed of the mobilisation, within three hours after prosecutors walked out of a compromised impeachment trial, was attributed to the speed and the spread of mobile-phone technology.

Like the Internet, the mobile phone as a platform for news and information dissemination relies on horizontal—rather than vertical—networks. The traditional gatekeepers of news—editors, publishers, news managers, and media owners—are bypassed, allowing groups and individuals the freedom to send out information without interference or restraint. The new media are also set up for interactivity: Feedback is built into the system, allowing greater democracy and interaction than in the old media. The speed with which the information is sent out — almost instantaneously in the case of SMS — means it is broadcast at little cost to a wide audience that can give immediate response. In the Philippine case, for example, activists sent out messages that were instantaneously received by friends and fellow activists who answered the call to mass up in a major highway to oust a president.

While there is agreement among media scholars and analysts that the ownership of the global mainstream media is being concentrated in fewer hands, there is less agreement among them about what impact this is having on the global public. In fact, there is evidence that satellite broadcasting and the emergence of community media are forcing many early assumptions of a global monocultural hegemony to be revised. Instead, the picture that emerges is of a world that is not getting homogenized but one where a pluralistic media that reflects society's diversity is starting to emerge.

In fact, some studies have shown that cultural globalisation has led to greater pluralism of content. In some cases, this is because minorities that are too small in a national context (like Mandarin speakers in Canada or Hindi speakers in the UK) become viable markets regionally and even globally, where indeed Hindi and Chinese movies have found comfortable niches. The phenomenon of 'world music', which makes available to a global market a range of indie bands from all over the North and the South who combine indigenous and Western music forms, shows how the global marketplace can resist hegemony. Indeed, many cultural forms—music, film, literature and art—are becoming detached from their spaces in national cultures and becoming part of an international consumer culture. Such internationalisation of the national and the local is taking place everywhere. While it makes for greater cultural diversity in the global market place, it is also part of the increasing commodification of cultural life.

Thus, some media scholars have resisted the idea of a single, hegemonic global media market. Instead, there are multiple, global, regional, national and local markets. Mexico produces telenovelas that are seen all over Latin America, parts of California and the Philippines. Brazilian soap operas are viewed widely in Portugal, once Brazil's colonial master. Taiwanese and Korean teen dramas are wildly popular in many countries in Southeast Asia. Hindi musicals are a hit in Indonesia and Central Asia, while Pakistani soaps are the rage in Nepal.

Whether this will stimulate local creativity and invigorate communities or not is still an open question. What is clear is that consumers already play active, rather than passive, roles in the commodification of cultural life. To a great extent,

they determine what they want to read, watch, or listen to. The increasing traffic that is taking place between cultures because of migration, tourism, and the pervasiveness of the mass media, is creating hybridised cultures that resist hegemony and encourage a variety of cultural choices. Moreover, consumers are not as passive as they are often thought to be. Many studies of “media effects” have shown that readers, listeners and viewers put in their own, often divergent, meanings and interpretations to the media products they consume.

Thanks to the media, there is now a greater awareness of the outside world and people have access to a wider array of information from a broader range of news outlets. And even when Western news dominates the airwaves, it may actually create a backlash against the rich and the powerful who are seen on the screen. Media messages are not always viewed in the way that message-senders have intended or expected. A propaganda film for a Third World dictator may be widely viewed by its audience as farce, rather than taken seriously. A soap opera, instead of reinforcing gender roles, may actually subvert them, as women viewers may interpret them in unexpected ways. For example, one UK study has shown that women who read romance novels find in them not so much models of submissive femininity but of a masculine ideal, as the men in romance novels tend to be more caring and sensitive than they are in real life.

In Brazil, some of the escapist soap operas have been credited with helping reduce fertility rates as families try to emulate on-screen lifestyles. In Pakistan, teleserials on themes such as gender equity or anti-corruption have proved popular not just within the country but also in India and Nepal, where viewers watch the programs via satellite.

Some technology is also allowing local groups to reclaim their roles as creative producers of culture. For example the simplified production of videos allows local groups to produce their own programs discussing their own situation. The participatory video in Brazil has dramatized the plight of street-dwellers to a global audience, while women’s video in India has done the same for marginalized women in the slums and villages of the subcontinent. Also individuals and groups around the world with access to the internet are creating their own websites and producing their own music on CDs.

The research on the cultural impact of television on behaviour and social values has shown that consumers interact with the media in complex, critical and reciprocal ways. Several surveys have shown that respondents give widely disparate answers to questions of impact, sometimes within the same peer group. Many variables seem to be at play, including the familiarity of a particular community with the social mores of the society where the programming originates, the connectedness of a country to the global economy, and the vibrancy of local culture. Television has turned out to be a more reciprocal medium than previously thought. Viewers are not passive consumers but critical receptacles of messages that are not interpreted in uniform ways. Even seemingly harmless entertainment content can have a subversive impact by, for example, showing viewers a world beyond the narrow confines of their village or their penthouse or by providing role models of such things as female independence, simple living, or democratic leadership and citizen participation.

Surveys in Eastern Europe and Asia have shown that Western programming is often seen to have maximum impact when it is newly introduced; its popularity

tapers off with time. Analyses of ratings data have also indicated that if people have access to relevant, professionally produced, interesting entertainment programming in their own languages, they will watch that and not glamorous, foreign-language programs. Certainly that is the case in India, where most viewers prefer local programs to canned foreign ones. The continuing strength of public-service television in Europe, Australia, Canada and New Zealand shows that intelligent programming has an audience and US-style infotainment does not always rule.

Except for hermit states like Burma and North Korea, there are now very few countries left where the state still exercises sole control over the media. There are exceptions: India with a long tradition of a free press still holds radio in the iron grip of the state. The country deregulated its television industry and has recently allowed limited foreign shares in television, but hasn't yet allowed foreigners to enter the print media.

Commercial and community radio have started to transform the media scene, by providing uncensored news and information in many Southern countries where it has been allowed to operate because of its largely entertainment content. In the rare instance where FM has been used for information exchange in community owned stations, as in Nepal and the Philippines, the result has been dramatic — in stirring public debate and forming public opinion in support of democracy. The local nature of the broadcast has also favoured content in minority languages, a phenomenon first observed in Latin America and now seen increasingly in rural Asia and Africa.

What Next?

The omnipresence and the profitability of the global media make it a monolith whose dominance is difficult to challenge. At the same time, the monolith has proven vulnerable. The imaginative use of global networks on the Internet and on 'small media' has provided alternative channels of information and for popular mobilization. Moreover, the audience preference for local and diverse content means they are open to a variety of media providers. Even as critics lament Western domination of the news, media consumers all over the world are clicking on the mouse and switching channels as a protest against the global media machine that churns out commodified news and entertainment.

Reform will not come overnight, and the change will not bring dramatic improvements in social justice worldwide. But, increasingly, there are critical voices being raised within media itself about the worldwide trend towards commercialisation and erosion of the public sphere. At various levels from the local to the global, there are things that are being done by a range of actors — communities, activists, NGOs, and even governments and those employed by the global culture industry themselves—to reassert the media's public service role and rescue it from the claws of the corporate profit machine.

The following are some of the initiatives that these groups and individuals are currently undertaking but these need further strengthening if the vision of democratic, pluralistic, and public-service oriented media is to be realised:

- Supporting community media and help them network with each other within countries and between countries. Replicate examples of community radio networks in Indonesia (68H) and Nepal (Radio Sagarmatha) where FM has shown it can play an important public-service function even when owned privately. Local stations can network with each other through broadband Internet at very low cost, and magnify their voices.
- Promoting and investing in wireless technology that will allow countries in the South to leapfrog the communications barrier. There are many examples like Grameenphone in Bangladesh which show that cheap and easy communication has a multiplier effect even in the poorest communities, empowering them and encouraging investments in income generating activities.
- Supporting the public-service role of television by encouraging local content, especially entertainment with social reform messages. Initial capital grants are the only things stopping such ventures from sustained production, replicating the success of South African and Pakistani models.
- Moving beyond criticism of global media and moaning about US control to doing something by supporting local efforts at public broadcasting and making computers and the Internet accessible and affordable in schools.
- Strengthening civil society's capacity within countries to monitor media and play an ombudsman or oversight role to curb over-commercialisation, monopolization and shoddy or harmful content.
- Implementing regional monitoring of programming by multinational broadcasters with transboundary footprints who engage in jingoism and glorify conflict.
- Carrying out more national and global research into the impact of media content on lifestyle, consumerism and political ideology so reform can be pinpointed.
- Supporting moves by civil society and media watchdogs in the United States and other Western countries to reform the global media and make their impact on the world more benign.
- Assisting alternative news mechanisms like Inter Press Service, Gemini, and Project Syndicate to spread their reach and impact all over the world by allowing them new media technologies for distribution.
- Helping organisations that support selected national media to get started by supporting them with developing business plans and arranging soft loans. For example, such help through the Prague-based Media Development Loan fund has helped Malaysiakini and 68H radio network in Indonesian to get off the ground.
- Studying and initiating innovative ways to restructure and democratise media ownership so that eventually public-service media, instead of commercial, profit-oriented media, become the dominant players in the global media market.
- Supporting small and independent media initiatives and alternative producers of cultural products.

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