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Globalisation and Media

Many Channels, Few Voices



As the number of mass media in the world is increasing, the number of owners is going down. Who owns the media of today, and how may the ownership affect news and other

media products? An expert in communication explains the difference between a consumer and a citizen.

A HISTORIC VIEW ON THE MEDIA SECTOR

It is very difficult to imagine the globalisation process without the existence of mass media. Media contributes strongly to the globalisation of society (art, culture, news, commercials, consumer culture, tourism and so on). Media themselves are also influenced by globalisation, through commercialisation and the appearance of multinational media conglomerates. This article will focus on the transnational conglomerates and how they are transforming mass media of today.

The development of mass media in the 19th and 20th century went hand in hand with the development of the nation states. In most countries, the formation of the press, radio and later the television was intertwined with the development of political parties, national cultural policies and so on. The mass media began as political or cultural institutions within the nation state, and played a significant role in the unfolding of democracy and for the enlightenment of the people. News media addressed solely a national audience.

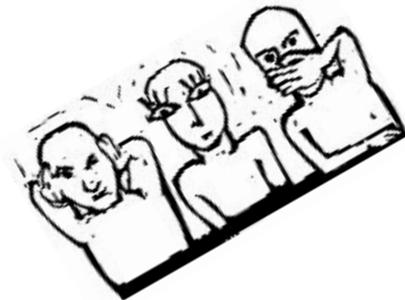
As we all know, the situation today is very different, although many of the original public service institutions still exist (such as the BBC). Current media developments are taking place more or less autonomously from the development of political institutions. Media today are governed as commercial media enterprises, and not by national political or cultural obligations. To understand news in the modern media landscapes, one has to see it from the perspective of news as an international industry and business.

A NEW MEDIA UNIVERSE

The four most obvious changes are the following. First of all, the rise of *transnational actors*, who do not operate on the basis of a national unit, but who address a region, a language, an ethnic group etc., or the whole world as one. Secondly, there is the vertical and horizontal *integration*.

Thirdly, there is *commercialisation*; the original public service institutions served a certain nation's geopolitical strategies (e.g. keeping the British Empire together or maintaining the US propaganda against the Soviet Union). The transnational news services of today are predominantly of commercial nature.

Finally, there is the *abundance* (or overflow) of *supply*. The availability of news about events in the world has increased considerably; earlier, foreign news footage was a scarce resource; still, as we shall see, the end result is often an almost complete lack of pluralism and multilateralism.



MERGERS AND TRANSNATIONAL EMPIRES

As in the business world and industry, the media world is also governed by the urge for mergers into ever larger and larger conglomerates, resulting in the existence of transnational media empires. This process began to wash over the corporate landscape in the 80s. The merger of AOL and Time Warner is the largest merger in the history of this sector. The conglomerates are to a large extent criss-crossing national borders.

VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL OWNERSHIP

Vertical ownership “bears a logical relationship to the communications industry”. As an example, the Walt Disney Company is a vertical corporation that owns newspapers, television, magazines, radio and books. In recent years, one also sees a tendency of mergers with the teleindustry, resulting in a situation where the corporations control every step of the process.

These steps are the creation of content, the control of the delivery system, and the wire into the home. Or, as stated by Rupert MURDOCH, the owner of News Corporation: “Our reach is unmatched around the world. We are reaching people from the moment they wake up until they fall asleep”.

Horizontal ownership is when there is a lack of logical relation. For example, companies in the nuclear defence family - Westinghouse and General Electric - own CBS and NBC. We see that the same corporations, who deliver the news, also have interests in other fields. As Ben BAGDIKIAN put it: “Today there is hardly any American industry that does not own a major media outlet, or a major media outlet grown so large that it does not own a firm in major industry.”

CONFLICTING INTERESTS

This may obviously result in conflicting interests, and media history is full of examples, just to mention a few for illustration: The American TV-channel NBC, owned by General Electric, was the only one not to bring forward the news about a big boycott against General Electric. Its owner, Disney, forced the TV-channel ABC not to broadcast a critical story about a Disney-park.

After the merger of Time and Warner, the magazine Time brought more articles and reviews than before about Warner movies. Silvio BERLUSCONI and Rupert MURDOCH are known to use even stronger force to control content in the media they own. BERLUSCONI’s double role as Italian prime minister and media emperor became disturbingly apparent in the handling of the recent Genoa incident by Italian mass media.

COMMERCIAL PRIORITIES AFFECT NEWS

However, the emerging of media monopolies and their direct control of media content is one thing, but there are other and more indirect effects that may be less immanent but more dangerous: one of them is

the commercialisation of media. Mass media of today are increasingly obliged to produce a profit in the market place, as they are parts of private corporations whose bottom line is to earn money. News is, generally subject to a process of *commodification*.

There is a strong competition on how to capture the audience and get top ratings, in order to attract advertisers. To obtain this goal, one looks at each other and copies, both formats (for instance breakfast news, live interviews), editorial choice (crime news, health news, reality TV) and also the news stories and footage themselves.

SYNCHRONISATION AS REPRODUCTION OF DISCOURSE

Increased transparency leads to a synchronisation of editorial decision-making, something that is most obvious during international crises. Because of the availability of breaking news and live-coverage from transnational broadcasters (such as CNN), the newsrooms in different countries are able to follow how an important story develops.

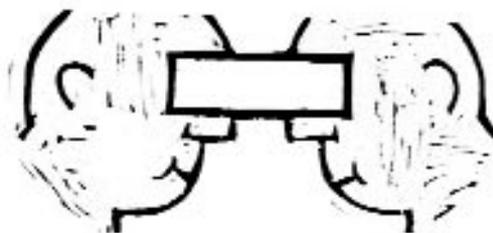
This fact in itself is an incentive to give priority to the very same story. Because of the limited resources, national and local newsrooms have limited time to develop an independent perspective on a story, and they may then more easily accept the initial framing of an international event.

Synchronisation therefore not only entails coverage of the same event, but also reproduction of a specific discourse. This means that in a world where we have never had more TV-channels, radio channels and newspapers and magazines, there is still reason to believe that these quantities do not necessarily mean that the voices are more differentiated.

A GLOBAL PUBLIC SPHERE?

The notion of a global media reality may lead us to believe that a global public sphere has emerged, as in the case of large public opinion formations in times of crises, but, it is on the contrary most often the case that political, economical or military decisions and actions concerning transnational or global matters take place without intense public attention.

The globalisation of economy, governance and culture has not been followed by a similar globalisation of the public sphere. The early media were part of a national debate and cultural room, whereas industrial and commercial interests guide the media develop-



ment of today. This means that in contrast to national public service media, the global media do not serve as media for public debates in the same way.

CONSUMERS, NOT CITIZENS

The media are serving an audience in the market place: an audience of private, individual consumers, instead of "citizens". Seen from the point of view of political economy, the globalisation of media industries is of no benefit to civil society. On the contrary, it represents the empowerment of large commercial interests at the expense of civil society and democracy.



Citizens' ability to influence public debate diminishes when large media industries are no longer accountable to national political regulation. Instead of an opening of the public space, this is all about privatisation. We may

need to abandon the blind idea of a global, public sphere and replace the term with "imperialist, private sphere".

NOT EVEN THE INTERNET GOES FREE

The Internet challenges the traditional news services in many ways, and the net will gradually blur the boundaries between national, foreign and international news media. In many cases, we have seen that the Internet is a source of information when other media fail to report the truth, as for instance after Genoa. The Internet carries a large potential for creating sub-cultures and new ways of distributing alternative news and information.



Unlike press and broadcasting, the Internet makes all news services in the world potentially available. However, I would very much like to stress the word "potentially". The Internet is open to anything, and you can find whatever material you want. Nevertheless, the abundance of material on the net makes the question of choice a matter of consumer knowledge about available services.

FEWER IS MORE

Branding of news and media services has acquired new importance, and we are currently witnessing a "battle of brands" on the Internet, where the big media corporations try to consolidate themselves. The industry research group MediaMatrix has recently reported that although the number of published

websites continues to rise astronomically, web users are actually spending more time on fewer sites.

Most of these are major news or gateway sites. On the top ten list, you will find the following: Yahoo, AOL, MSN, Geocities, Netscape, Lycos and so on. A closer examination of these top cyber-medias illustrates the news source concentration that we are also witnessing in the traditional broadcast media.

CONCENTRATION OF OWNERSHIP

Behind these Internet news services you will find mostly - and in many cases only - a handful of news suppliers like Reuters, ABC, and Associated Press. This means that the various transnational media giants have also succeeded in taking control over quite a large part of the Internet.



The ownership concentration in global media may have many different outcomes. Among the more serious ones is the question of what happens during international conflicts. There has been done a lot of media research on globalisation of war news, especially on the Western media coverage of the Gulf War and the Kosovo bombing. Today this question is again urgent, as the US-Afghani conflict is unfolding before our eyes and we do not know which news sources to trust.

• *Ingrid DREYER is a long time member of NKSF, the SCM Norway. She graduated in mass communication and currently works as an information consultant at the Norwegian Council for Higher Education. This article is based on a workshop led by her at the WSCF Globalisation conference, hosted by SCM of Sweden (KRISS) in H or, in August 2001.*

