

Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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Mapping the World: Understanding the Complexity of Cultural Identity and (Local, National) International News

Ebba Sundin

There was such a rush, I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure - news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelve-month, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. As for Spain, for instance, if you know how to throw in Don Carlos and the Infanta, and Don Pedro and Seville and Granada, from time to time in the right proportions - they may have changed the names a little since I saw the papers - and serve up a bull-fight when other entertainments fail, it will be true to the letter, and give us an idea of the exact state or ruin of things in Spain as the most succinct and lucid reports under this head in the newspapers: and as for England, almost the last significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649 [...](Henry David Thoreau in Walden, 1854, reprinted 1999: 86-87)

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of what sense people make of news stories they consume has been on the agenda within media and communication studies for a long time. It is a multi-faceted question with many different focuses, depending on which group of people we are talking about (for example, ethnic groups, age groups, professional groups) or what news content the question relies on (for example, local news, special interest news, world news). In this chapter, the question is addressed with respect to the relationship between the sense-making of the world and cultural identity in the form of studies of how news are mapping the world.

Most of the early studies of the image of the world as it is represented in the media were based on newspaper studies. Some of the earliest date back as far as almost a century ago, but greater interest was shown from

the 1950's and 1960's onwards when the question of imbalance between different parts of the world was raised. The question about the information flow and the role of news led to the debate of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) initiated by the UNESCO in the 1970's. The history of this debate is thoroughly described by McPhail (2006).

Some of the studies from the 1950's and 60's focused on the factors that could explain news selection (see White 1950; Gieber 1956; Östgaard 1965; Galtung and Ruge 1965). For example, Östgaard (1965:46) discussed the factor of identification and noted that:

Cultural proximity thus appears to be a major asset for a news story, and the news media in any given country will tend to present the picture of the outside world as seen through the ethnocentric eyes of the receiver of the news.

The debate of the NWICO was based on the assumption that media had a major impact on people's awareness of the world "next door" or much further away. Although, Östgaard (1965) noted the role of cultural proximity in the selection of news, he did not really discuss that the audience might interpret the "world maps" from their own cultural perspective. In later studies, this perspective is more heavily emphasised. For example, Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996:181) states that the later debate in international communications included the recognition "*that diverse audience bring their own interpretive frameworks and sets of meaning to media texts*". During the last two decades, the definition of international communications has also shifted from global news flows to a concern about global communication technology and its impact on an individual's opportunities to communicate across the borders of nations and cultures. These new viewpoints need theoretical frameworks different to the early studies of international news flows which relied on a quite simple media structure where newspapers were printed in a 24-hour cycle.

The existing news paradigm including the five elements of the event, news value factors, the news interview, the inverted pyramid and journalistic objectivity (Høyer and Pöttker, 2005) is still valid. In the context of professional news journalism it is still valid, despite the fact that the traditional news media family (newspapers, radio and TV) have acquired more siblings in the form of the Internet, mobile phones and tablets. In a study of Danish news media conducted in 1998, Holm (2001) showed that most of the news from other countries was still selected according to traditional news criteria but the categories of non-traditional news were

more frequent than earlier. His conclusion was that an expansion of news could be seen with much more international news than there had been hitherto. So following the advent of new media forms, the news audience has more channels to access international news. Also, the audience is no longer dependent on the national context of the selection of foreign news.

During the years of the NWICO debate results many studies of global news flows were conducted. In this chapter, we will focus on three multinational comparative studies: Gerbner and Marvanyi's study 'The Many Worlds of the World's Press' (1977), Sreberny-Mohammadi's 'The World of the News' Study (1984), both of which were connected to the NWICO debate, and a more recent 'Foreign TV news' project conducted by Wilke, Heimprecht and Cohen (2012).

2. "THE MANY WORLDS OF WORLD NEWS"

In Gerbner and Marvanyi's introduction to their study they conclude: "*Many different versions of the day's 'world news' can be equally true and significant when judged by different standards of relevance* (1977:52). One of their findings of what the world really looked like from the different perspectives was that Western newspapers showed little interest in the Communist bloc, while Soviet newspapers carried more news from Western countries and Eastern Europe. One of their explanations for the differences could be found in the argument that there were different editorial policies in different newspapers, as well as different types of societies. The study was based on one week's foreign news in 60 daily papers in nine countries.

Sreberny-Mohammadi (1984:132) also found that news from Western countries dominated while Eastern Europe and the developing parts of the world were "invisible". In the study including a week's news articles from newspapers in 29 countries, she found that regional news was the most dominant, meaning "*every national system devoted most attention to events happening within and to actors belonging to its immediate geographical region*" (1984:127). Sreberny-Mohammadi (1984:130) also recognized the media systems' different ideological frames and what that meant for the different coverage of the international news.

Gerbner and Marvanyi (1977: 60) claimed that their study was only to be seen as a starting point for comparative analysis. Sreberny-Mohammadi (1984: 132) suggested other approaches to the study of international news

flows and also emphasised the need for qualitative studies. In her study, she found that quantitative and qualitative analyses gave different results in terms of geographical focus (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984:129). One of her conclusions can be detected in the following statement: “*As our interest lay in a general mapping of international news presentation, we could not answer many intriguing questions*” (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984:130).

Wilke, Heimprecht and Cohen (2012) use the term ‘news geography’ in their description of how foreign news coverage is related to other countries and territories. One of the main aims of the study is to detect the ‘world view’ in TV news and to show similarities and differences. Overall, 17 countries were part of the quantitative study in which the TV news was coded during four weeks in 2008. One of the findings of the study was that:

in no country on the planet are the mass media able to comprehensibly report news from all over the world, nor would that be in their recipients’ interest. Moreover, the basic task of journalists is to decide which countries they want to cover, and thus determine the ‘world view’ which the media conveys. (Wilke, Heimprecht and Cohen 2012: 307)

One of the conclusions was that the study confirmed previous studies, which can be taken to mean that traditional news values are just as strong in the international news flow. Furthermore, the imbalance in coverage has not changed: *The picture of the world is still uneven, particularly with respect to regions of the world that are totally underrepresented. This may be criticized as in earlier decades* (Wilke, Heimprecht and Cohen 2012:319). In the study, the focus is still on Europe and the USA. One interesting notion is that in Poland there was greater news coverage of Russian than of the USA. Geographical proximity might be the explanation, as well as the history of Poland belonging to the Communist bloc, which would mean that it still has a closer relationship with its eastern neighbour.

3. GLOBAL NEWS MAPS AND IDENTITY

The value in the tradition of global news flow studies lies in describing what the world appears to look like from different perspectives and one of its strengths is in showing the power of this flow from certain areas. The three studies of international news flow have similarities in their descriptions and certain images of the world appear. What sense individuals make of these images and how influenced they are of their own cultural

and national identity in their interpretation of the world as seen from the news perspective are questions left for further research.

When globalization became such an important issue especially during the 1990's, including within the field of media and communication studies, Curran and Park (2000:11) took a different view and suggested in their introduction to *De-Westernizing Media Studies* that "*perhaps nations are still centrally important, and that their continuing significance tends to be underplayed by globalization theory*". Their reader was based on case studies from around the world and portrayed different media systems through the lenses of nationalism and globalization. The same approach was adopted by Lee, Chan, Pan and So, as expressed in the following statement:

Despite much talk about the globalization processes, we argue that international news-making is inherently domestic and paradoxically national: the same event may be given distinct media representations by various nations through the prisms of their dominant ideologies as defined by power structures, cultural repertoires, and politico-economic interests. (2005:320)

In numerous theoretical and scientific discussions from the 1980's onwards, the national identities and national consciousness were pushed into the shade when the beams of light were directed to the concepts of globalisation and individualisation. New media technology gave the individuals the tools to cross their national borders and communicate in a completely new way in post-modern society, sometimes called the network society. For researchers in media and communication studies this was a challenging time with new focus on the impact of new communication patterns and many the researchers and theorists have focused on the issues of globalization, identification and identity (c.f. Thompson 1995; Giddens 1991, 2002; Castells 1996, 1997, 1998, 2011; Baumann 2000, 2005; Anderson 2006; Deuze 2007; Watson 2008). At the same time, it must be stressed that the importance of national media systems has not been completely neglected, for example Hallin and Mancini (2005) focus on cultural and political structures in their major comparative analysis of media systems in 18 countries of Europe and North America.

Two kinds of identity definitions can be defined: national identity and individual identity. The definitions could of course be treated as a macro and a micro level of research, but in the beginning of theorising globalization, there was a problem that in most cases the individual identity definition did not recognize the nation but embraced the thoughts of new borderless societies with a free information flow. In an attempt to under-

stand the global news flow this could have left us with explanations based on individual identity theories connected to the borderless networks. The problem is that these explanations would not have provided proper understanding since individuals would always be affected by the national ethno-centrism that they grew up with. This is not to say that individuals are also affected by experience in life in the form of exposure to other cultures, within their "home nation" or while travelling.

The best framework for understanding global news flows might be to connect thoughts of individual and national identity, although the two might seem to be disparate. Thompson (1995:215) calls this problem a "paradox of reflexivity and dependency" and he also refers to Beck's terms of individualization and institutionalisation. From this sociological viewpoint the paradox covers a much larger context than the sense-making of media messages.

Nevertheless, in studies of news flows, international as well as local, both aspects of the paradox, sometimes referred to as the 'glocal', might give a richer theoretical framework in order to explain what sense individuals really make of the information. Not only from the view of contemporary society and societies, but also in historical studies, it is important to recognise cultural and societal conditions that the audience might have had at that time, since the world map changes from time to time, and not only from the perspective of news media. To illustrate the complexity of understanding sense-making among media audiences but also looking at the attempts to reveal the content in media and its worth, we can refer to the words of Dervin :

[...] whatever one group of individuals calls "information" or "knowledge" at any given point in time is applicable only to that time and space and to the self-interests and observing capacities of the "observers". (1989:70)

In her development of the sense-making approach, Dervin makes it clear that the focus is on discontinuity and how individuals make sense of this in their own construction of the received information. Two of the key concepts in this approach are 'gaps' and 'gap-bridging' in order to recognise knowledge-lacks and overcoming them by constructing knowledge.

4. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, three different studies of the flow of international news were chosen to illustrate the discussion of what the world looks like from the viewpoint of the news media. The studies represent different historical eras and one of the conclusions from a comparison is that not so much has changed from the early studies (Wilke, Heimprecht and Cohen 2012). From this point of view, these descriptive studies serve their purpose and they can also, for instance, be used in discussions of the imbalance between political and economic power in the world. But in all three studies, the researchers are fully aware of the need for other research approaches if the impact on the audience is to be understood. A theoretical framework that will consider the cultural identity of the nation as well as the individual has been suggested for the purpose of arriving at a better understanding of what sense the audience makes of the world maps produced by international news. The challenge for media researchers is to bridge the gap between the paradox of individual and national (global) identities. Most likely the reward will be a better understanding of the complexity of cultural identities and the flow of local, national and international news.

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