



## Questioning Global Communication Power

### *Introduction*

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Over the past 50 years, both policy and research debates have at times raged over how *change* and *power* should be interpreted in global communication. This introduction to the Special Section titled “Global Communication Power: Shift or Stasis?” makes the case for the need to explore this question from fresh vantage points. It frames critical and creative pathways for thinking about and rethinking current transformations in global media. The introduction, then, provides an overview of the contributions and draws recurring themes together, posing key questions for further research.

*Keywords:* *global media, legacy media, communication power, media industries, media events, piracy, advertising, legacy media, news, entertainment*

In an age of disruption, legacy media find themselves in a struggle to transform and reinvent themselves. At the same time, media innovators are emerging in both expected and unusual places. As a result, the landscape of global media is undergoing a creative, technological, economic, cultural, and political metamorphosis that extends the reach of dominant players while simultaneously ushering in alternative players. These transformations have been invigorating scholarly pursuits of new conceptual approaches and innovative methodologies that question the driving forces, underlying causes, and current mutations in global media. We believe—as do many others whose meeting in Doha in February 2015 generated the idea for this Special Section—that the salience of these pursuits to the broad agenda of global media studies is growing.

On the global stage, the velocity of change in media initiatives is, it seems, accelerating almost every month. Often when people discuss these changes they focus on communication hardware, and indeed, the emergence and exploitation of newer communication technologies have been pivotal. “Newer” is relative, however: Satellites, after all, are nearly 60 years old, and optical fiber cables 50. Digital compression and mobile media technologies have almost immeasurably lengthened the horizons of these

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early inventions. Transoceanic cables have had a major rebirth. Remote sensing can now operate with more than 16,000 color intensities (shades).

Yet the invention, development, applications, and even non-uses of these information opportunities are, to use a frequent expression from technology studies, all “socially shaped.” Media industries, governments, banks, education and health services of all kinds, hackers, and criminals all figure among the global forces constantly forming and re-forming communication technology apps (in the very broadest sense of *apps*).

With this Special Section, “Global Communication Power: Shift or Stasis?,” we question whether we can usefully continue to take for granted the international dominance of a few enormous players. Are global media flows absolutely dominated by giants, some old and some new, such as the BBC, News Corp., Sony, WPP advertising agency, Edelman PR, Pearson publishing, Apple, Samsung, Google, and their very closest rivals?

Behind this immediate issue, however, lies a deeper, more momentous question: Where is all this going anyway? This question has been asked for the best part of 50 years, and not just in the sometimes closeted halls of the academy but also in major international public forums.

### **Global Communication Debates**

Debate has raged for around 50 years already about the changing configuration of transnational media communication. That seemingly academic dispute even spilled over into the arena of Cold War confrontation when, in the early 1980s, the United States and United Kingdom governments formally withdrew their nations and their funding from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), doing so over UNESCO’s majority support for state-centered steps toward a new global information and communication order. Policy debate has continued since, with two World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS) in the early 2000s and numerous other projects, such as the Internet Governance Forum and the ITU’s Internet of Things Global Standards Initiative, not to mention “soft power” (Nye, 2005) discussions.

Academic research, however, has refined and nuanced the issues through debate on cultural proximity (e.g., Straubhaar, 1991), the “glocal” (e.g., Robertson, 1992), “modernity” (e.g., Tomlinson, 1991), cultural hybridity (e.g., Kraidy, 2005), world regions (e.g., Iwabuchi, 2002), “contra-flows” (e.g., Thussu, 2006), cultural industries (e.g., Hesmondhalgh, 2012), the political economy of ocean cable infrastructure past and present (e.g., Starosielski, 2015; Winseck & Pike, 2007), and the multiple international institutional impacts of U.S. commercial culture (e.g., de Grazia, 2006).

For readers less familiar with the backdrop in the 1970s and 1980s —others can skip past this and the next paragraph—it can be summarized as a struggle between two solutions to global communication imbalances. From the UNESCO majority’s perspective at that time, not only were there enormous information technology disparities across the planet but also alarm at the asymmetrical flow of global news and at the potential erosion of distinctive cultures, even languages, that could not withstand

the growing flood of cheap Western (mostly U.S.) media exports and advertising. The critique was partly nationalistic, partly anticonsumerist.

The UNESCO majority strategy envisaged states as the central mechanisms for solving these problems globally. This ran contrary to the modernization paradigm that had been developed in the U.S. academy and foreign policy establishment, notably at Princeton University, and in media by MIT's Daniel Lerner (1958). His approach identified the best hope for constructive economic change in the Global South through harnessing the cultural influence of media (radio and print at that point) to stimulate "psychic mobility" among the South's tradition-bound rural majority. This meant that commercial media would foster a consumerist, can-do mentality—not too far from Appadurai's emphasis, in a much-cited essay, on "the work of the imagination" (1996, p. 3) via media. This would in turn power commercial growth and, in time, affluence, but it would not lead to Soviet-style state-centric solutions to anything. This commercial media strategy was to be updated, though with no explicit engagement with global imbalances, in *Technologies of Freedom* by MIT's Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983), something of a bible for today's neoliberal media policies.

### **Change and Communication Power**

A discussion of the velocity of change in a global media context also evokes the notion of communication power. Broadly defined as the ability to produce and distribute media content, communication power has long been restricted to the dynamics of supply from large media producers to satisfy the demands of a global audience. The increased and widespread ability to produce and receive media content is redistributing communication power and is giving rise to nontraditional global players. From the popularity of global TV formats to individual chat app users, the production, distribution and consumption models are being rethought.

Two dimensions of the meanings of *change* and *power* have dominated discussion. First, the communication technology gap between the haves (in regions, nations, or neighborhoods) and the rest: Has this changed, and to what degree? Second, an ever more visible jostling for global communication space by emergent players (reconfiguration of state international broadcasting, small states as big media producers, or the ubiquity of social media tools): What does this change in the distribution of communication power?

We think the case studies in this collection will help to refocus debate about the range of actual dynamics and antinomies that pulse in global media today. For us, it is not a question of transition from the two prior evolutionist models to a postmodernist lens but an acknowledgment of the primacy of endlessly shifting power in media industries. Constantly changing technology affordances render the terrain continually unstable. Macropolitical and competitive market vectors compose the narrative. Wiser and less wise microeconomic decisions, and sheer happenstance, join the jig.

### Shift or Stasis?

This Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* unpacks a series of current—and disputed—developments in international media practice that we think present fresh points for reflection on these conundrums. This collection does not simply zero in on news or entertainment or advertising or media firms but engages with all these dimensions and others not institutionally structured. Nor does it presume that the state's day as a media actor is over. These 10 authors engage with vital topics of today's global mediascape.

The Special Section begins, then, with some dimensions of media practice that are not institutionally structured: Sreberny's analysis of global news flows, responses, and counter-responses following the Paris *Charlie Hebdo* slayings of January 2015 invites readers to reflect on the velocity of the cultural ricochets that ensued. What do they entail for our mostly stable models of political communication processes in the context of current communication technology affordances, accessible to some billions of global citizens? How were these ricochets processed through the interfaces of legacy and newer media formats? How may metaphors of Stephen Hawking's theoretical physics give us a stronger grasp of what is going on under our planetary noses?

Similarly, Mattelart's discussion of audiovisual intellectual property in the global economy engages with subterranean media circuits and practices whose very name—piracy—was coined by media firms with an ax to grind. Mattelart endeavors to help us distinguish actuality from assertion in this highly contentious sphere. In the process, he implicitly invites us to stretch out our timeframe of analysis and not to fall into the media-influenced trap of selecting events over a short span and then basing analyses on an abbreviated reality. In so doing, media researchers risk being caught in the same vice as accountants who use quarterly figures to predict long-term profitability. In a sense, whereas Sreberny engages with the phenomenon of speed, Mattelart engages with duration. Both are essential analytical perspectives.

Sinclair's study of shifts in the global advertising industry directs our attention to perhaps the most important yet least mentioned dimension of the mediascape (in media studies, that is). At the base of most media microeconomics, and integral to contemporary consumer demand, advertising still engages many more critical disquisitions in cultural studies than across-the-board analyses. The industry's own research on advertising has to date focused on the practical short-term conditions for project success—or, because so much of it is proprietary, we are led to suspect so. Sinclair invites us to focus instead on the combination of crisis and opportunity afforded by the Internet for the advertising world and on the integration of public relations and other functions within the world's top advertisers to the point where advertising itself may be becoming a (large) minority element in those firms' activities. At the same time, he invites us to acknowledge the spaces that continue to present themselves for significant world-regional advertising firms.

The contributions by Jirik and Zayani engage with the state as a direct media actor, examining China's foreign broadcast agency CCTV-9 and Qatar's Al-Jazeera operations. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the concurrent apogee of neoliberalism, such instances should appear as anachronistic as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Yet the United States maintains Voice of America, Radio Martí,

Al-Hurra Radio and TV; India's Doordarshan continues; *Russia Today* is hardly dead on its feet; France 24 continues France's international presence in its former colonies; and the South Korean, Venezuelan, and Turkish governments have made efforts to generate their own international projects. These and other examples strongly suggest that we should cease pretending the state has vanished altogether from the airwaves and engage with actuality on this front as on any other.

Jirik, who has worked at CCTV-9 on and off for a total of several years, summarizes his observations in a feature article and addresses the location of the operation within the—to date—strongly entrenched soft-power plank of China's foreign policy. In doing so he endeavors to specify how the state exercises authority over the institution, which appears to be rather far from the stereotypical mechanisms that outsiders would likely predict it to use. The Chinese government's understanding of *soft power* is more akin to the public diplomacy currently favored in the United States than to the soft power of U.S. cultural industries that Nye (2005) identified as a decisive advantage for U.S. foreign policy. However, just as the foreign policy of any nation, however powerful, is perpetually confronted by challenges, so too there is CCTV-9 compelled to address ongoing dilemmas in pursuit of its defined mission. In the rapidly emerging confrontation between the United States and China, its operation will likely become even more complex.

Zayani has written earlier monographs on Al-Jazeera. Here he directs his attention to the challenges faced most recently by this 20-year-old operation. It has seen the intense regional impact of the Arab Spring and experienced a see-saw between being the voice of the Egyptian public but then being angrily defined by other Gulf States as the voice of Egypt's 2012–2013 Muslim Brotherhood government. It has launched and then closed Al-Jazeera America. It has lost the automatic funding of the Qatari government. It has shifted its interest from a television network to a multiplatform news provider. Will Al-Jazeera continue to make a similar dent in regional and global broadcasting in the upcoming 20 years?

Whereas Jirik and Zayani represent an enduring tradition in the critical analysis of media industries, Geniets illuminates some of the blind spots in current developments in international broadcasting. Her findings in relation to the strategies of international news organizations in low- and middle-income countries address the messy complexities of legacy media's attempts to embrace emerging media forms. Analyses of global news expansions are common features in studies of international media production, but Geniets proposes focusing equal attention on their distribution platforms. She argues that the rush to embrace smartphone applications reveals a substantial gap in research on their effectiveness. She concludes by addressing how researchers may engage actively with these media developments, while recognizing their elusive nature.

The third set of contributions—Esser on European and U.S. format trade developments, Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu on the shifting dynamics of Turkey's significant TV drama exports, and Khalil on the Arab region's entertainment TV—engage with major unfolding stories in the global media power scenario. These narratives sharply diverge, evidently, but if there is a single research question they collectively prompt, it would ask how media firms compose strategies for handling unpredicted challenges. These challenges are intensified by economic imperatives, political conflicts, and communication technology changes.

Esser assesses the patterns of influence and impact in the realm of transatlantic media. Unlike past exports of fully produced television programs, the trade of television formats have developed and grown exponentially in the last 15 years. These franchises, mostly game shows and reality TV programs, are increasingly becoming valuable intellectual property titles. By focusing on the rise of European format producers and the reactions from U.S. and European media conglomerates, Esser offers a model for examining implications of such moves on conventional television production and distribution patterns. Although this transatlantic shift may have been short-lived from an ownership perspective, creative control may still have a lasting impact on U.S. media conglomerates and their European-based format producers.

Television formats of unscripted programs are produced as franchises in various local contexts, and producers of scripted drama series from the non-English speaking world are also developing products for global circulation. Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu explore the increase in Turkish television exports to more than 70 countries. Their findings move beyond explanations linking the export and success of these series to a brand of Turkish politics that successfully combines Islam and democracy, pointing our attention to media as an export-import product. When properly priced, placed, and promoted, these series achieve popular success. The authors' fieldwork interviews point out a broad spectrum of dynamics that include economy, politics, and media flows.

An important characteristic of global media is the evolutionary behavior of media industries seeking to trigger and respond to a range of opportunities. Examining the state of Arab entertainment television since the sociopolitical uprisings of 2010, Khalil identifies a twin process of business push and local audience pull. The first refers to aspects of homogenization and standardization of media products to attract Arabs with a further regionalization of entertainment media. The second refers to reclamation of locality as national and subnational audiences seek alternative ways to produce and use entertainment media. These processes are strongly interactional, linking global, regional, and local business strategies; media markets; and popular movements to economic, political, social, and symbolic power. Such analyses account for the rise of the local in media products and push analytical frames beyond the power game between only political and economic structures.

### **Conclusions**

From the research studies we have collected, it appears that the visible dynamics of media power are constantly recalibrating.

Sreberny's "media-event chains" may reveal complex shifts that challenge our "understanding of history, politics, and representations," but at the same time, they reveal the bounds of our conceptual models to explain these processes and their likely outcomes. Mattelart's dissection of audiovisual piracy similarly pushes our analytical focus beyond such slogans (we might compare soft power) toward cool-headed assessment of longer-term media trends: What is the timeframe for change? Sinclair's evidence encourages us to engage seriously with the advertising dimensions of global media but to balance its evaluation between acknowledging the remarkable concentration of power at the industry's apex and paying due attention to emerging constellations of power at the world-regional level.

Jirik, from an unequalled vantage point, dispels facile generalizations about the strong Chinese state's grip on its international broadcaster but also indicates that solutions to its desired role may be elusive nonetheless. Zayani analyzes a state broadcaster at a crucial turning point in its fortunes, moving us beyond calculations about Al-Jazeera based simply upon Qatar's huge GDP. Geniets discourages shallow techno-optimism, spelling out its serious unreliability for framing news-delivery policy in the Global South.

Esser takes us inside the remarkable mergers and acquisitions of the global entertainment format trade and pushes us, as does Mattelart, to take the longer view of cultural industry shifts. Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu warn against reducing Turkey's remarkable success in selling its TV series to any single factor while underscoring how precarious such commercial triumphs may be. Khalil draws our attention to processes of media reterritorialization as national, subnational, and hypermedia are re-emerging in the Arab world's regionally crowded media landscape.

In sum, these studies, beyond their information value, also serve as valuable methodological case studies in global media shifts. In this Heraclitean flux, there is little evidence of stasis.

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