

Europe as Other: Difference in global media discourse

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For centuries, Russia and the Arab world have taken turns as Europe's most significant Other. This study asks what happens when the discursive gaze is turned in the opposite direction, and what insights the answers may give into the dynamics of global mediated society. Its aim is to explore the role some media could be playing as harbingers of cosmopolitan democracy by comparing news broadcast to global audiences by established European television channels (BBC World, Deutsche Welle and Euronews) and those known as 'counter-hegemonic' (Al Jazeera English and Russia Today). In focus is the tension between 'othering' mechanisms, which can be thought detrimental to democracy, and respect for and representation of diversity, which can be thought to promote it. Complementing previous research on how European media have gazed outwards and depicted others in the global environment, the project asks what is involved in reporting difference and differently.

Exploring meaning-making in a mediated global environment (aim and research questions)

The aim of the project is to explore the role of global media in paving the way for cosmopolitan democracy by comparing news that is broadcast to a global audience by established European channels with news that is broadcast by channels claiming to provide alternative perspectives ('counter-hegemonic' media). In focus is the tension between 'othering' mechanisms, which can be thought detrimental to democracy, and respect for and representation of diversity, which can be thought to promote it. In order to achieve the aim, answers will be sought to three sets of research questions:

1. Do Al Jazeera English and Russia Today (counter-hegemonic global channels) report the world differently from BBC World, Deutsche Welle and EuroNews (established, Europe-based global broadcasters)?
2. How do journalists working in these global newsrooms conceive of their roles, especially when it comes to reporting difference or differently?
3. Is Europe 'othered' in the discourse of Al Jazeera English and Russia Today and if so, how? If not, how are the alternative perspectives and/or vantage points of these channels translated into depictions of a region that has historically 'othered' Russia and the Arab world?

The ability to deal with diversity is essential to cosmopolitanism. The thesis of the project is that 'imagination' is entailed in this, and that storytelling is intrinsic to the construction of cultural and political identities under globalization (as at other times). Following Delanty (2006: 37), its point of departure is that cosmopolitan

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imagining articulates the social world “through cultural models in which codifications of both Self and Other undergo transformation”. The analysis of television news stories aimed at global audiences provides fruitful ground in which to develop an understanding of such processes.

The media and cosmopolitanism (theoretical underpinnings)

Under globalization, the interest of scholars from a variety of disciplines has increasingly converged around the possibility of a common space in which politics and culture intersect beyond the borders of the nation (see for example Appadurai 1996; Barker 1999; Beck 2006; Boltanski 1999; Chalaby 2005 & 2007; Chouliaraki 2006 & 2008; Cohen *et.al.* 1996; Cottle & Rai 2008; Delanty 2003; Hannerz 2005; Meyrowitz 1999; Robertson 2008; Stevenson 2003; Szerszynski & Urry 2006; Thompson 1995; Tomlinson 1999). This has been variously referred to as a global public sphere and a transnational communicative space, among other things. Such discussions take place on the same wavelength as responses to Samuel Huntington (1996), which call for a dialogue between civilizations.

There has been a tendency to emphasize the unifying features of this sphere – what those who populate it have in common, or the potential their exchanges may have for facilitating shared democratic futures. Similarly, the literature on media globalization – an essential feature of this space – has often been concerned with cultural homogenization. In many scenarios, technological change has led to a shrinking of the planet embodied in the notion of the ‘global village’, and consid-

erable attention has been paid to the role of the media in propagating common norms and democratic values. Other literature, however, emphasizes the importance of difference and of safeguarding cultural diversity. A number of scholars have also questioned claims about the purported contribution by media actors to common understandings, on empirical grounds (see for example Robertson 2010).

Global mediated communion (which is invoked when British princesses are mourned, Twin Towers fall, tsunamis strike or black men swear the US presidential oath) is a central feature of the process which, according to Beck (2006), is a precondition for cosmopolitan democracy. Whether convinced of or sceptical about cosmopolitanization processes and their preconditions, scholars who have pursued the subject maintain that under globalization, citizens must be able, in ordinary ways, to form connections with others who are distant and different. The “Europe as Other” project joins this discussion from an unusual empirical point of entry.

Narratives of shared worlds and representations of difference (the empirical study)

The project is designed to work on different analytical levels. One level is overarching and meant to be relatively uncomplicated, to facilitate the analysis of large amounts of material and the incorporation, at a later date, of analyses conducted by non-European partners. The other level is focussed and interpretive, and draws on more sophisticated analytical techniques.

Previous research has shown that journalists themselves often stress the importance of opening different windows on the world; of proffering different perspectives on the events unfolding in that world; and of letting different voices be heard when those events are recounted (Painter 2008; Robertson 2005). Among them are journalists working for two global channels associated with Europe's Others: Russia Today (RT) and Al-Jazeera English (AJE). As an AJE journalist put it, soon after the channel began broadcasting in 2006: "You have to report the world from many different perspectives in order to report the world back to itself." The first of the three research questions posed above asks whether 'counter-hegemonic' media do as they promise, and report the world from different perspectives than established, Europe-based global broadcasters.

To answer this question, news programmes broadcast by BBC World, Deutsche Welle and EuroNews will be compared with news programmes broadcast by RT and AJE. A largely quantitative analysis will be carried out of basic traits of an unusual, and unusually large sample of, material: daily news programmes broadcast on all five channels from 2006 (when AJE began operations) comprise a corpus of over 4600 broadcasts to date. The analysis will establish what regions and countries constitute the 'maps of meaning' drawn by each channel, and which topics are associated with them. It will investigate which actors occur in each channel (are Africans represented more often on AJE than the BBC? Do elites predominate in one channel and civil society or 'ordinary people' in another? Are there more men or women in established or 'counter-hegemonic' channels?); which are associated with the various topics

(how often are Islamic actors associated with terrorist acts? how often are Russian actors associated with corruption and undemocratic behaviour? how often are European actors associated with interventionist acts and discriminatory practices?)¹ and which have the power of definition.

Interspersed with this coding work, fieldwork will be conducted at the newsrooms whose reports are being analysed, and journalists responsible for 'reporting the world' will be interviewed.

To answer the third research question, a selection of AJE and RT news items coded in the analysis outlined above will be revisited. The selection will be comprised of news stories about Europe, or which have a bearing on the relationship to Europe of Russia and Middle Eastern actors. Using methods and building on previous work, these news items will be analysed in terms of their narrative traits. Attention will be paid to the common elements of story structure: the abstract (the anchor's lead-in); orientation (established by asking what is happening, when, where and to whom); the complicating action; the evaluation (to be coded as whether the meaning of the action is commented on and, if so, what it is), and so on. Such coding will establish what story is being told. Other questions will explore *how* the story is told. They will include: from which vantage point does the narrative unfold? Is it possible to identify with any of the central actors? What are their traits? Are they like 'me' or different, and if so, how is that difference portrayed?

The main thesis to be pursued when seeking answers to all three research ques-

1 The purpose of such questions is not to perpetuate stereotypes, but to provide empirical grounds for confirming or challenging their existence.

tions is that, if we are to understand how media actors may help people make the connections that underpin a cosmopolitan outlook, and play a leading role in the globalization of society, we must be attentive to evidence that some actors may not. For this reason, the project has a comparative design. The point is not that globalization is a myth, as Hafez (2007) has admittedly good reasons for arguing, or that cosmopolitan democracy is a utopia, but that the existence of these things is an empirical question, and not just a matter of normative or philosophical discussion.

Why a multi-method approach?

A common approach to media analysis in general, and the analysis of global media in particular, is to use either quantitative analysis of large corpora, or qualitative analysis of selected media texts. The research design of this study is relatively unorthodox, as it combines both approaches. It does so because the texts being studied are by their very nature ubiquitous, and to follow others who have explored this territory by focusing on isolated cases would not do justice to the plethora of media messages inundating audiences under media globalization. At the same time, purely quantitative approaches fail to gain analytical purchase on the meaning-making properties of media texts. If the mechanisms of othering and/or representing diversity are to be accessed and made sense of, a more interpretive analytical approach is required.

Why narrative analysis?

The point of departure for the “Europe as Other” project is that insights into the preconditions for the emergent cosmo-

politan understandings, and perhaps even identities, on which democracy in the global era must rest, can be gained not just by looking at *what* is reported about the world, but also *how* it is reported. At the heart of this inquiry is an interest in interpretive frameworks “of common, cultural references and thematic codes, incarnated in master or model narratives” which help make things comprehensible and relevant to the public (Birkvad 2000: 295). Documenting these, and explaining how they work, presents a methodological challenge, but the effort can be worth it, as it can teach us much about cultural power in globalized societies. Master narratives tend to be experienced as something innocent, because they are naturalized (Barthes 1993: 131). What a narrative approach attempts to gain analytical purchase on is the generation of these sorts of understandings – what is taken for granted, or that which goes without saying.

Why everyday reporting?

The empirical work that has been done on global television in general, and the relationship of global television to cosmopolitanism in particular, has been insubstantial to date. In an age of rolling, 24/7 news, it has been regrettably based on anecdotal evidence which focuses on distant suffering and conflict. Cosmopolitan citizenship, however, has to do with rights, obligations, and a sense of belonging in a world of overlapping allegiances. In global society, communities (be they local, national, regional or cosmopolitan) are defined less in ‘reporting for special occasions’ such as wars and disasters as in ‘banal’, or everyday, cultural discourse.

Why television?

Put differently, why not analyse the sort of media that cosmopolitan elites have traditionally consulted (i.e. 'upmarket' newspapers and magazines) or, conversely, social media and/or news published on the internet (a medium which has revolutionized communication in the global era)? Television is where everyday stories about the world are regularly rehearsed. More than traditional print media, the imagery and narrative techniques deployed in television news reporting bestow the medium with the potential to forge immediate connections between viewers in one place and the distant others populating their screens. Cyberspace, it can be argued, can make such connectivity even more immediate. But it is too amorphous for the purpose of this project, and reliable techniques to analyse the legion of voices and discourses that circulate on the internet (which is less a medium than a platform for a plethora of media) remain elusive. Programmes produced by the news organizations in this study can be viewed not only on the internet, but also on mobile phone or as podcasts. This does not mean that the storytelling function of television news is becoming unimportant. As the busy inhabitants of the global village turn increasingly to the internet to skim the facts of breaking news, television broadcasts have been given more scope to go in-depth. This fosters the development of mechanisms which may bring the world closer to viewers on other continents, and make them comfortable with the diversity on which cosmopolitan democracy rests. But it could equally strengthen the mechanisms that keep the world at arm's length through Othering practices.

To be continued

The project summarized above is in the process of moving from drawing board to workshop. Its significance is that it complements previous research on how European media have gazed outwards and depicted Others in the global environment, by asking whether cosmopolitan democracy can be served by reporting the world from different perspectives. The hope of its designers, as they roll up their sleeves en route to the aforementioned workshop (and newsrooms) is that it will contribute to understandings of 'othering' mechanisms – and thus to how they may be overcome – by examining how Europe looks, when seen through the cameras turned on it by its Others. It will make use of unique and hitherto unexplored material, which will be analysed by scholars based in different academic traditions who share the same intellectual concerns.

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