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The problem of globalization.

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There is a general consensus that the contemporary world is best understood through the prism of globalization. This view is shared by most social scientists, politicians, journalists, businesses, and indeed broad sectors of the general population. Opinions differ as to whether globalization is a positive or a negative development, but there is general agreement that whatever is going on is either a symptom or a consequence of globalization.

There are many good reasons for this view. The number of passengers on scheduled international flights has risen by a factor of six between 1975 and 2000. The number of international tourist arrivals rose by three and one half times during the same period. Much less happily, the number of internationally displaced refugees rose by around 50 per cent in the twenty years before 2000. During the quarter of a century after 1975, the duration of international voice telephone calls rose by around 25 times. We could go on multiplying such striking figures in every area of human activity. There is obviously something important going on.

Observing the world is one thing. Explaining it is quite another. Whatever everyone else does, social scientists are under an obligation to use words with a certain degree of care: when we use the term globalization we are making a claim that this is a concept that can help us analyse and interpret the nature of contemporary reality. We are making the claim that this way of thinking about the world is both intellectually coherent and can be tested against evidence. While I accept that globalization is the common term used in contemporary discussion, I am much less convinced that it is useful for the study of media and communication.

The first problem is that there is no single theory of globalization upon which all social scientists, let alone everybody else, are agreed. David Held and his collaborators admitted, after a rather exhaustive study of the question, 'no single

coherent theory of globalization exists' (Held et.al. 1999, 436). The second problem is that most of the writers on globalization are self-proclaimed social theorists and since they tend to operate at rather an elevated level, 'there is an almost spectacular lack of evidence in the work of commentators....associated with the globalization theory' (Hesmondhalgh 2002, 177). In any unqualified form, the claim that we live in an epoch best analysed through the concept of globalization fails the two primary tests of social science: it is not intellectually coherent and it does not rest upon an evidential basis.

A writer committed to globalization will respond to the first charge by agreeing that other writers use the concept, but that they are mistaken as to its nature, and claiming that the one particular version to which they adhere is entirely adequate. An alternative response, available to those more critically inclined, is to ask whether there is any underlying set of assumptions which are common to the main theories of globalization and, if so, whether they are sustained by the available evidence.

I think that it is possible to identify at least five major claims that cover the range of at least the leading theorists:

1. Understanding globalization requires a radically non-reductive methodology.

Appadurai is the most famous exponent of this view, writing that 'the complexity of the current global economy has to with certain disjunctures between economy, culture and politics' (1990, 296). He is joined in this belief in the autonomous logics of culture, the economy and so on by, amongst many others, including Giddens(2002, 12-13), Beck(2000, 11) and Held and his collaborators (Held et.al. 1999, 437).

2. The central importance of symbolic exchange to the current epoch, in contrast to earlier ages when physical objects were the dominant element in economic

activity and symbolic exchange. Waters is the writer who puts this most clearly: 'it follows that the globalization of human society is contingent on the extent to which cultural arrangements are effective relative to economic and political arrangements...[and]...the degree of globalization is greater in the cultural arena than either of the other two' (Waters 1995, 9-10).

3. In the global epoch, there is no dominant centre to the world (Bauman 1998, 59). This is particularly marked in the case of the mass media, where 'the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes' (Appadurai 1996, 31).
4. In the global epoch, the degree of interconnectivity is such that, in the case of media artefacts, the circuits of meaning production are increasingly detached from the specific tastes of given national audiences. The products that circulate globally are neither 'western' in content nor part of an apparatus of domination. On the contrary: 'contemporary syntheses can be constructed from symbolic and material resources that originate almost anywhere on earth' (Lull 2001, 137).
5. The global epoch is marked by the erosion of the power of the 'Westphalian' state system, in economics, in politics and in culture (Beck 2000, 4). As a consequence 'the military, economic and cultural self-sufficiency, indeed self-sustainability, of the state – any state – ceased to be a viable prospect' (Bauman 1998, 64).

Not all writers on globalization share all of these ideas, but I think it is reasonable to say that the authors cited here are leading figures in the field and that while they might contest this or that point, their work lies within the boundaries defined above.

The immediate question is then: are these propositions true? In order to answer that question we obviously need to turn these abstract ideas in to the sorts of

propositions that make concrete statements about the world. These statements can then be subjected to evidential review. If we do that, we obtain the following results:

1. If globalization is characterised by disjunctures between politics, economics and culture, then we would expect to find the dynamic of broadcasting is today less readily explained by economic and political factors. Internationally, the reverse is the case: 25 years ago the main forum for the international debate about media products was Unesco; today it is the WTO. The MPA is probably more active, and certainly no less active, today than it was then. Internally, important broadcasters that were driven largely by cultural and political forces are today increasingly responsive to economic pressures (BBC, CCTV, Doordarshan etc.)
2. If globalization is a function of the increased importance of symbolic exchange, then we would expect to find that media products are more globalised than the more material products of the preceding epoch. In fact, the central products of the Fordist epoch, automobiles, aeroplanes and petrochemicals, are much more uniform around the world than are TV dramas and quiz programmes.
3. If globalization is marked by the absence of global centre, then we would expect to find that there were a number of comparable centres of media production around the world. While it is true that the US is not the only centre of media production, it remains by far the most important, both in terms of its absolute size and its domination of the international trade in programmes. In 2002, News Corporation obtained 76 per cent of its revenues from the USA, and Viacom obtained 84 per cent. In 2001, AOL Time Warner obtained 85 per cent of its revenue from the USA. In 2002, 60 per cent by value of imported TV programmes in the UK came from the USA, as opposed to only 5 per cent from Germany and 2 per cent from France, both of which are major production centres.

4. If globalization is marked by the fact that artefacts are no longer identified with particular national cultural taste patterns, then we would expect to find that a major media company sources its products from around the world. In audio-visual production, the most favourable case for this proposition made out for Disney, which does indeed source many of its animated fictions from legends, novels, fair-tales and so on from all around the world. Disney, however, transforms these sources into products that primarily satisfy the tastes of the US market. Joseph Man Chan, in his study of the transformations of the Chinese story of Mulan, writes 'there is a tendency for Disney to give a foreign culture an American and universal spin' (Chan 2002, 232).
5. If globalization is marked by the decline of the Westphalian state system, we would expect to find that states are weaker today. On the classical Weberian definition, this is obviously not the case. States today use violence against other states at least as frequently as they did a quarter of a century ago: in the British case, they use it today very much more frequently than ever before. States also use violence against their citizens just as much as in the past. The population the federal prisons of the USA, which is admittedly the world record holder for incarcerating its own citizens, rose by about seven times between 1970 and 2002. In the case of media, the existence of broadcasting satellites is often taken as evidence that the state is weaker. In fact, when there have been clashes between states and satellite broadcasters, the states have been the winners, as for example in the case of the Kurdish Med-TV (Hasanpour 2003).

The evidence therefore seems to contradict all of the main propositions of globalizastion theory. Whatever has been going on in the world for the last quarter of a century, this is not the way to theorise it.

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