

*The Media in a Globalized Age*

*– why the Global Village is more village than global*

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By Andrew Horvat  
Japan representative  
The Asia Foundation \*

In the past few minutes a number of you have volunteered some excellent answers as to the meaning of the word “globalization.” One of you stated that globalization means changing the ways in which information flows and consequently the ways in which communities and cultures interact with each other.

Much has been made of how globalization is homogenizing the news and making us all watch the same TV footage and read the same stories. With all apologies to my fellow Canadian, the communication theorist, Marshall McLuhan, I am going to take issue with such a view.

That the free flow of information has changed the world is not in dispute. We have seen this after the fall of the Berlin Wall when totalitarian regimes crumbled in Eastern Europe. It is also true that competition between the electronic and print media has resulted in a certain kind of “dumbing down” of previously serious print outlets.

But to suggest, as some people have, that new technologies in the hands of international global media organizations threaten the cultural identities of nations or peoples is to fail to understand the ever-present and growing demand for culture-specific, local news.

When I asked a few minutes ago how many of you use personal computers to access the news, we found out that most of you looked at the websites of various newspapers, broadcasting organizations, magazines and wire services all of which predate the Internet, some by centuries. Very few of you looked to chat groups or bulletin boards. Far from killing the old media, the new technology has actually strengthened the role of newspapers and magazines.

When McLuhan, predicted more than 30 years ago the advent of the global village, many people thought the new technologies in communication would make it possible for us to access all sorts of information freely on our own without having to depend on

newspapers. What we did not contemplate is that—instead of liberating us from intermediaries – inexpensive computers and universal access to the Internet would so inundate us with massive amounts of unsorted information that we would become even more dependent on those who could tell us what was important and accurate and what was not.

In other words the global village is not so much “global” as it is a “village.” Just because we can access news from the other side of the planet does not mean that this news is either useful or interesting to us. The old dictum, “all news is local news” is as true today as it was when foreign correspondents first discovered that they were filing stories not so much **from** where they were stationed as **to** the places where the consumers of their articles were living.

When I landed in Hokkaido this morning I bought half a dozen newspapers to see what stories they placed on their front pages. I looked at the local paper, the *Hokkaido Shimbun*, a national daily, the *Yomiuri*, the English language *Japan Times* and for good measure I brought with me a copy of the American edition of *Time* and a Japanese monthly opinion magazine. The reason I did this was to show you that the easy availability of news does not in and of itself change what people read. The new technologies may be able to penetrate political boundaries easily but the information they transmit must be directed to an audience that is receptive to the information being transmitted.

Let me give you an example. The *Hokkaido Shimbun* carried a picture of a whale on its front page. Such a picture would not find its way to the front page of a Tokyo paper at this particular time. Right now, the Tokyo papers are preoccupied with Tama-chan, a sea otter, which has been sighted resting on concrete blocks after straying into Tokyo’s Tama River. Tama-chan is hogging the headlines in Tokyo. In other words, the demand in Tokyo is for sea otters. Whales are out.

Such a distinction may seem trivial but it is not. News is as consumer-driven as any other business. The idea that media organizations manipulate the news and that global media organizations will manipulate the news globally, forcing readers to read news they do not want to read makes sense only as the plot of a James Bond movie; this

nightmarish vision has no basis in real life.

Turning to something a bit more serious, I see here on the front page of the *Hokkaido Shimbun* a headline indicating that national insurance will now be handled on a prefectural basis. Why is this top front-page news? Because it concerns the people in Hokkaido. The *Yomiuri*, a national daily, carries an article on the alleged dangers of imported Chinese mushrooms. This is a national story since the mushrooms are available throughout Japan and the Sino-Japanese dispute concerns all Japanese citizens. It is precisely for this reason that a Hokkaido paper will not want to display the mushrooms story on its front page; doing so will destroy its special appeal to local readers.

By way of contrast, *The Japan Times* has a headline on a court ruling on the Unit 731 (bacteriological warfare issue). It also has a headline on North Korea including a photo of US Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, who visited Japan, this week. Such a heavy concentration of foreign news shows that *The Japan Times* appeals strongly to the expatriate community in Japan. Again, this appeal may seem international, even global, at first glance but this English-language paper is just as much a community newspaper as the *Hokkaido Shimbun*. As you can see there is a clear relationship between a newspaper and its audience. This relationship has been affected in no way by the technological ease with which newspapers obtain their information.

This is not to say that news content has not been altered by the new technologies. Thanks to the advent of 24-hour cable television, and thanks also to the decreased costs of satellite transmission equipment, the evening news broadcasts of CBS, ABC and NBC are now no longer as influential as they were before. Ironically, the new technologies have actually made news coverage more not less parochial. Former colleagues of mine working for the major networks tell me that whereas the three networks used to carry news of national and international significance in the past when they had the human and capital resources to do so, these days, the broadened constituency for 24-hour news increased the size but decreased the sophistication of audiences and has resulted in less thorough coverage of international events.

Except in the case of a major breaking international story, cable networks only broadcast short snippets about events overseas. And, since viewers can access the news quickly 24 hours a day seven days a week on CNN, the networks have had to turn their

attention to stories cable is unlikely to cover. The older networks now specialize in medical information or social issues, which can be run any day of the week. And since they no longer have the advertising revenue needed to maintain bureaus around the world, they cover mostly domestic stories.

The national newsweeklies too have altered their coverage to take into account their inability to compete in speed against the electronic media. That is why the issue of *Time* I brought with me carries a cover story titled “What Makes You Fat?” Now the shocking truth – hold on to your hats – is that it is not pasta or steak that’s going to make you fat but too much pasta and too much steak. The need for the national news weeklies to provide such “news you can use” to their readers is clearly the result of faster communication on a global basis. These “newsmagazines” have now had to turn to soft news or in-depth coverage in order to compete with the much faster cable networks.

Let’s turn for a moment to the power of the media in a globalized era in the dissemination of democratic ideals. Images of the Berlin Wall being toppled, of Czech crowds in the streets and of the conjugal Romanian dictators, the Ceausescus fleeing for their lives are still fresh in our memories. We also know that the free flow of information between East and West Germany greatly contributed to undermining the faith of East Germans in their repressive government. The statement attributed to Henry Kissinger – he who controls information wields power – makes us understand why dictatorial regimes to this day have centrally managed news medias.

But, while the globalization of the media surely does further the spread of democratic principles, the relaxation of centralized control of information does not necessarily lead to mutual understanding between communities, countries or ethnic groups. On the contrary, the relaxation of domestic controls on news and information can on occasion actually release long-suppressed feelings of frustration against neighbors. The present worsening of relations between Japan and China is a case in point.

Without a doubt, one of Japan’s best-written magazines is *Shokun*. The magazine is strongly nationalistic and by all accounts enjoys the solid support of tens of thousands of readers including many Japanese in key decision-making positions in government, industry and the media. The magazine’s January issue carried an interview of a historian by a popular journalist in which the latter uttered satisfied sighs of agreement and

admiration as the former argued that original reports of The Rape of Nanking ought not to be accepted as real because the Western reporters who described the event were either left-wingers or else in the pay of the Chinese Nationalist government or both. This magazine article is but the latest in an outpouring of anti-Chinese opinions in the Japan media, triggered in large part by statements strongly critical of Japan made in recent years by senior Chinese leaders.

A commonly heard explanation in Japan for the steady flow of anti-Japanese statements from China is the apparent need of the Communist Party of China to legitimize its one-party rule at a time when it has abandoned hard-line leftist ideology in favor of the virtual capitalism which assures millions of Chinese an unprecedented level of prosperity. A corollary of this argument is that ordinary Chinese would have a more favorable opinion of Japan if only China would be a more democratic state. The problem with this logic is that Chinese society is far more pluralistic today than it was in the early 1980's when I covered it as a news correspondent. At that time, the Public Security Bureau oversaw every aspect of a Chinese citizen's life and I knew of Chinese reporters who were taken away by security agents from their desks while at work for failing to toe the official line. Such blatant suppression of individual opinion is relatively rare in China these days.

In other words, there would appear to be a positive correlation between increased press freedom and the emergence of anti-Japanese sentiment in China. Attending a conference in Beijing recently, I slipped across the street from my hotel to a book store where I found an English-language book published in the late 1970's by the Foreign Language Press of Beijing titled, "Deng Xiaoping and his Foreign Friends." The book devoted one or two pages each to photographs of the senior Chinese leader with heads of state from various countries. It is interesting to note, that Japan received more than eight pages in the book. Deng was shown riding on the Japanese bullet train, meeting the late Emperor Hirohito, and visiting Japanese factories.

It is clear that "friendship with Japan" was a part of Chinese foreign policy, dictated from above, with little regard to the personal opinions of ordinary Chinese citizens many of whom must still at that time have had unpleasant memories of 15-years of hostilities (1931-1945) between their country and Japan. In the late 1970s and early

1980's China was in great need of Japanese technology and capital. Open discussion of unresolved issues pending from World War II, would not have been tolerated by a Chinese leadership in need of help from Japan and in full control of the country's media. One might argue that, far from fanning the flames of anti-Japanese sentiments in an undemocratic China, leaders making anti-Japanese remarks today may actually be responding to widely shared feelings toward a former foe in a steadily democratizing China.

Thanks to globalization, popularly held views become transmitted very quickly. Reaction to negative opinions from abroad, draw emotional responses, as we can see from the *Shokun* cover story I described earlier. As one of you stated at the beginning of this session, "Globalization means changing the ways in which information flows and consequently the ways in which communities and cultures interact with each other." The new technologies most certainly deliver information faster than ever before, but that does not mean that this information is necessarily more accurate or that it leads to greater mutual understanding.

As one historian I know likes to say, diplomacy used to be relatively easy back in the early nineteenth century when it was carried out by aristocratic envoys meeting counterparts in palaces behind closed doors. The fate of whole countries could be decided before dinner. By way of contrast, managing international relations among open, pluralistic, democratic societies where citizens have virtually unlimited access to electronic media, requires far greater skill. National interests clash with popular feelings. The opinions of millions have to be reconciled.

May I suggest for reasons I have outlined above that when we look at globalization of the media that we refrain from conjuring paranoid images of evil media moguls exerting total control over the world through corporate empires and contemplate instead the far more realistic dangers of

- technology-induced information overflow,
- declining reportorial standards,
- shallow international coverage, and
- parochial reader/viewer interest.

The threat of the new technology therefore is likely to come not from control but chaos, not from the “global” but the “village.”

\* The opinions expressed here by the speaker are his own and do not represent the views of The Asia Foundation.