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President's column for ICA Newsletter, September 2007

International, global or transnational?

Sonia Livingstone

No, I'm not proposing a name change for ICA. Rather, this was the theme of the joint ICA/IAMCR session I organised at the IAMCR conference, held in Paris in July. Since IAMCR was celebrating its 50th anniversary,¹ it seemed a good moment to demonstrate collegiality with our 'friendly rivals'. The panel asked some crucial questions, for whether we conduct our work on a local, national, regional or international basis, we all work within context of globalisation. We are, also, encouraged to collaborate across borders, to employ comparative methods, and to respond to work from around the world. So, does it matter if we call this a transnational, a global or an international lens? And do these concepts relate differently to communication research, practice and policy?

The panel was chaired by Cees Hamelink, U Amsterdam, a previous president of IAMCR and an active ICA member. Speakers were ICA member Oliver Boyd-Barrett (Bowling Green State U, Ohio), IAMCR member Claudia Padovani (U Padova), and two speakers from both organisations - Toshie Takahashi (Rikkyo U, Tokyo) and Indrajit Banerjee (Nanyang Technological U and chair of AMIC – the Asian Media and Information Centre). Robin Mansell, IAMCR President, and I acted as respondents and, since the audience was both intrigued and lively, the dialogue proved stimulating.

Although for many, the 'global' has replaced the 'international', it seems there is a growing wariness of the grandiosity of claiming a 'global' perspective, given the continued unevenness in both ICA's and IAMCR's inclusion of scholarship around the world. Takahashi quoted from cultural critic Ulf Hannerz, who noted:

"I am also somewhat uncomfortable with the rather prodigious use of the term globalisation to describe just about any process or relationship that somehow crosses state boundaries.... The term 'transnational' is in a way more humble... it also makes the point that many of the linkages in question are not 'international' in the strict sense of involving nations... In the transnational arena, the actors may now be individuals, groups, governments, business enterprises, and in no small part it is this diversity ... we need to consider".

While we can readily concur with this agenda, different speakers reported varying connotations of the key terms, depending on their linguistic, cultural and political contexts. Each is defined, partly, by that which it opposes – international vs. national, global vs. local, transnational vs. that which is static within a nation. Thus, each term has value, depending on our research questions. What unities all three terms is, I suggest, a prioritisation of the comparative.

Jim Beniger wrote that 'all social science research is comparative', indeed 'all analysis is comparative'. The article that apparently avoids comparative claims by focusing on a phenomenon in just one context or country is, nonetheless, comparative insofar as it implies either universalistic claims (by assuming commonality with others, by refusing to contextualise the phenomenon in a specific

¹ For those who are wondering, ICA was first formed as the National Society for the Study of Communication in 1951. It changed its name to the International Communication Association in 1969.

locale) or particularistic claims (by contextualising thoroughly and so implying matters are different elsewhere). And even if the author avoid explicit comparisons, the reader – whether in the same country or elsewhere – will undoubtedly make them on his or her behalf.

Being myself influenced by Lakoff and Johnson's brilliant book, *Metaphors We Live By*, I suggested in my response to the panel that we embrace the modest impulse to avoid totalising statements and, instead, focus on metaphors of connection and comparison. Four metaphors seem to me to capture the ways in which we work comparatively, and they guide the activities of our professional association also:

- *The coffee house*. Despite critiques of the ideal and reality of Habermas' public sphere, communication scholars worldwide seek out places to meet and discuss their ideas face to face, and much attention is paid to establishing inclusive, fair and open conditions in which to do this. Conferences remain central to this, though online forums are also valuable, and the quality of the symbolic space (and its coffee), is crucial.
- *The patchwork quilt*. Although each scholar selects and works their own square, in our journals, literature reviews and conference programmes, we establish some degree of patterning. Still, a degree of mutual contrast and disorder can be peacefully accommodated. The emerging pattern, often pleasing precisely because it integrates such diversity, is better perceived at a distance, in the eye of the beholder, than by the individual contributor.
- *The twisted rope*. For theory development, particularly across disciplines, epistemologies or cultural contexts, uniformity is not the object. Rather, the hope is to twist together diverse strands to achieve a meaningful whole. This recognises continuities while allowing new themes to emerge from those that preceded them. In our intellectual dialogue with each other, whether in conferences, journals, teaching or any other forum, this, surely, is our aim.
- *The gestalt image (e.g. of two faces or one vase)*. In our research methods, especially when working across different contexts, or in collaborative teams, there is occasionally a moment of insight when one's perspective shifts and everything is transformed. Whether the perspectival shift is from insider to outsider, outsider to insider, or something else, a project without such insights remains lifeless, failing to generate a flash of understanding or recognition in the reader. Our aim, surely, is not only to ensure these 'gestalt' moments but also to keep both perspectives simultaneously in view.

There may be other, equally productive metaphors that guide our work – I'd love to hear of them. On this occasion, I was delighted to represent ICA at a major conference with over 900 communication scholars from over 150 countries and to take part in so lively a dialogue of comparison and connection.

