

# Can the news media bring people around the world closer?

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It is one of the biggest questions in contemporary journalism: can our global news media actually bring people closer together? Does the world wide web and our other international media help us communicate or understand people who live far away from us? Polis Summer School Student Marie-Shireen Hadid tackles the core conundrum of cosmopolitanism in this guest essay.

## Challenges Of Cosmopolitanism by Marie-Shireen Hadid

It is more and more often said that the world is shrinking, that we are living in an era defined by unprecedented networking and connectivity in which "the national" is becoming global as ideas, cultures and values are being shared world wide. The barriers between here and there, regional and universal, traditional and modern, acknowledged and soon-to-be-acknowledged are slowly fading away. In other words :

*"The world may never have been freer, but it has also never been so interdependent and interconnected" (Mulgan, 1997: 1, cited in Van Dijk, 1999: 1).*

The setting, therefore, is global interdependence. The actor is the possible cosmopolitan, associated with openness to the world of cultural differences. Cosmopolitanism "contains within itself a certain utopian drive to construct a new world of tolerant, world-sensitive sensibilities" ( Skirbs, Kendall and Woodward, 2004). The mentioned notion of openness is, however, enigmatic and widespread, although it is commonly acknowledged that, as far as it is concerned, the words "moral" and "ethical" are synonyms and the commitments that are drawn from them, empathy for and interest in other cultures , form a significant part of the term's meaning:

*"Cosmopolitanism implies and requires, therefore, both reflexivity and toleration. In political terms, it demands justice and liberty. In social terms, hospitality" (Silverstone, 2007).*

However, there is an ongoing debate (Nussbaum and Cohen, 1996) as Skirbs, Kendall and Woodward (2004) pointed out : " reminding of its inherent promise, limitations and contradictions: while it commonly represents a tool for radical social imagination and radical projections of cosmopolitan democracy (Archibugi and Held, 1995; Held, 1995) and cosmopolitan citizenship (Hutchings and Dannreuther, 1999), it is also a catch-all phrase that renders its meaning irrelevant (Pollock et al., 2000)".

## Uncertain Future

The media is an important actor in the development and enhancement of cosmopolitanism, especially in the era of digital technologies, focusing on "new media". If asked, journalists would be the first to say that the future directions and forms of journalism are uncertain like never before.

So, is it possible to develop a sense of cosmopolitanism and to further enhance it by converting to the notion of "citizen of the world" (Chouliaraki, 2006)? And if so, the question Skirbs, Kendall and Woodward (2004) put is not only appropriate, but a necessity in order to reach the core of the concept: "is the cosmopolitan worldview a view from nowhere, as van der Veer (2002:165) provocatively puts it, or is it a view of the world from a particular, Western angle?" Does new media have a role in promoting cosmopolitanism or is it a factor that separates people and deepens differences instead of diminishing them ?

It could be argued that cosmopolitanism is a western ideal. For example, for Kanter, the cosmopolitans are citizens of first-world countries or part of the elite classes from other states sharing Western ideals, as it is identified by Skirbs, Kendall and Woodward (2004).

### **Western Monopoly**

Amongst others, Schiller (1971), Herman & Chomsky (2002) formulated concerns regarding the theory that the mass media was monopolized by Western culture and spread around the planet, thus "feeding" the world with its values, as it was summed up by Machin and Van Leeuwen (2004). But would that be a reason of concern, from a cosmopolitan point of view? Supposing the world reached a homogeneity of positive values, there would be a single media perspective accordingly. The diversity of ideas would slowly diffuse. However, in that case, the possibility of the development of a "cosmopolitan media dictatorship" should be taken into consideration.

Contradicting this assumption are Robertson (1995) and Giddens (1999), who have showed that the feared imperialism model is out-dated as it neglects the consequences of the transnational so present nowadays and the two-way flow of ideas and diversity. They challenge the assumption that Western media is taken by others as delivered and the culture assimilated just as it would be in the West. And Machin and Van Leeuwen (2004) further strengthen this idea by summarising the conclusions of researchers such as Straubhar (1991), and Moragas Spa & Lopez (2000) showing that people generally choose local media anyway, therefore "culturally proximate" (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2004), which promote their own influence, reducing that of the Western media.

### **World Mirror**

The proof for that lies within the results of the reception studies conducted by Katz & Liebes (1986) which have demonstrated that people from different non-Western backgrounds filter the Western media through their own mirror of the world. That is how different 'negotiated' readings are created and there is no better example than Silverstone's "Media and Morality-On the Rise of the Mediapolis" beginning with a summary of a BBC Radio 4 interview broadcast, in which an Afghani blacksmith offers his own account of the attack on the World Trade Center: a naive understanding of the events, filtered through his culture and translated in such a way that was meaningful for him.

Also, it can be stated that the Western ideas and input on events are not the only ones heard world wide anymore. A perfect example of that is Aljazeera, a major actor in the Middle East and for wider Muslim publics. "The Doha-based network has been a catalyst for media reform over the past decade. It is watched in every international news organization, as it gives the 'non-Western' view on world affairs" (Beckett, 2008). Another argument is that of the existence of networked journalism and this is where new media steps in. Thus different inputs from all over the world are available through new technological methods such as blogs, websites etc.

Therefore, it could be stated that new media brings the world together, compiling different ideas in a place where they are accessible for everyone. However, it could be argued that new media could be, as well, a reason of distance between people and deepened differences. It is a known fact that people tend to have different opinions and beliefs and the great existing diversity of news interpretation offers the choice of different sources of news. Thus, conflicting views draws people, goals and beliefs apart, which is the opposite of cosmopolitanism.

### **Unequal Access**

Also, the access to new media is not in equal proportions around the world. While in the Western world Internet access and new technological means of communication are standard, there are plenty of remote places world wide where they are not common. Some people having the means to express openly their views, while others are prevented from doing so due to lack of access; could that be embedded in cosmopolitanism: new media discrimination?

Also, how could cosmopolitanism respond to situations of crises, such as war or attacks? One might try and find an

answer to that question by looking at 9/11 and 7/7 as key moments in the evolution of this relationship.

As J. Brasset (2008) states : "After 9/11 the possibility for cosmopolitan thinking 'beyond' the mainstream view was articulated by a range of authors, including Archibugi, Habermas, Held and Linklater". Strongly contrasting with the general response of the mainstream media – e.g. 'with us or against us'; 'the axis of evil' –the other responses that were heard regarding 9/11 were strongly cosmopolitan: the need of understanding, grasping, and attempts to try to predict and prevent future similar attacks.

### **Awareness Raising**

July 2005 in the UK started with a "strongly positive feel" (J.Brasset,2008). After winning the competition to host the 2012 Olympic Games and the Live 8 concerts raising awareness like never before to the world about African poverty, on 7 July, G8 leaders met in Gleneagles. However, the 'strongly positive feel' that accompanied the Make Poverty History campaign by the G8 came to a halt when the events of 7/7 took place.

"When the London bombings happened, the primary response made by Blair and echoed by campaigners was that the terrorist attacks were an attack on the G8 reformers, an attack on cosmopolitanism." (J. Brasset, 2008). The horror that is usually born as a consequence of attacks, especially those viewed as national offence, was translated in the British mainstream media as a switch in attitude: from the center of positive cosmopolitan messages to taking sides and a division between pro- and con- cosmopolitans .

Also, the common goals and values envisioned prior the attacks were soon "laconic 'might have been'" -s (J.Brasset,2008), shattering the previous positive "all for one" feeling the plans had inspired to the world.

### **Response To Terror**

The cosmopolitan response to 7/7 fell apart into "either you believe that a combination of cosmopolitan law, participatory democracy and global justice is the only way to prevent the production of terrorism, or, you accept and perpetuate the terms of the global war on terror" (J.Brasset,2008): a line was drawn between friend and foe. Ironically enough, the response to the attacks was not cosmopolitan at all, in spite of it taking place in a period of full promotion of cosmopolitanism and working together for a common better standard. Cosmopolitanism fatigue or the alarming signal of a flaw in the grasping of the concept?

A similar, smaller analogy could be made referring to the words of J.C. Ong (2009) on Gillespie's ethnography (1995) in which an analytical remark is made : "when she discusses how Punjabi teenagers continually seek to redefine their ethnicity in their reception of media products. She identifies that, in their talk about Coca-Cola and McDonald's TV ads, there is an expressed desire to transcend ethnic difference. However, in their reception of TV news about the Gulf War, they 'lose' this cosmopolitan orientation and become trapped in binary thinking of 'us and them', friend and foe." And this fact has a great influence on the media.

Therefore, the challenges cosmopolitanism needs to surpass are not few, nor small. Although the identity of global citizen is better sketched than it was 10 years ago, progress is still to be made. "Cosmopolitanism" is an ambiguous word and its meaning is still to be defined, depending at the moment on numerous considerations. And its definition can't be better put than in the words of J.C. Ong (2009) : "It is variously enabled and disabled by a host of factors. [...] At the core of cosmopolitanism there is a multiplicity of tensions.

### **Global and Local**

The tensions between proximity and distance, between attachment and commitment, between global and local, between universals and particulars, between us and them, between media and identity. To trace these tensions longitudinally, cross-culturally, and critically across time and space would allow to find not cosmopolitan, in its fixity and singularity. But, crucially, one may discover the conditions that enable and disable cosmopolitan hospitality in a society desperately seeking to make sense of itself".

And it is a known fact that the ideal of cosmopolitanism can be traced down in different branches of social sciences, such as politics or philosophy. But while politics is becoming more and more controversial and philosophy is far from being a common passtime, media is an essential part of the every day life. As Boyer and Hannerz (2006) put it : " [...] , journalism is often among those sociocultural phenomena which contribute to the current translocalization, transnationalization, and cosmopolitanism of contemporary life.[...] One can hardly be an 'informed citizen' of the world without being greatly dependent on the work of journalists" – even as the precise form of that dependence may now be changing quickly, with new modes of organization and new technology.", and maybe with new paths towards a cosmopolitan society.

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IR245: International Journalism and Society-The Role of the Media in the Modern World

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