

Globalised Journalism in the Internet age

‘Globalisation’ may be the catchword of the moment in both the academy and popular imagination, but it’s not new to the business of news. At least since the establishment of Reuters and the invention of the telegraph, news reporting has gone global. But what is happening today seems to be both qualitatively and quantitatively different from previous technological revolutions.

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Global journalism today accesses instantaneous, multimedia communication networks, products and sources. However, these same technologies also remove journalists’ monopoly on international news, forcing a re-evaluation of who creates, transmits and ultimately owns the news. ‘Globalised journalism’ may be an oxymoron; it is certainly a paradox.

This presentation examines the role of foreign correspondents, government interventions in the news creation process, and the new players in global media.

It considers how global television undermined the Khmer Rouge’s credibility in Cambodia, but recognizes how governments subsequently deployed new technologies to make their spin on international events universal. It shows how foreign correspondents have become increasingly dependent on these sanctioned internet sources, even as their dominance of international news is challenged by websites created by the most extreme of news makers.

I will consider the following questions:

- ∑ Do the new globalised media technologies help or hinder “good” journalism?
- ∑ What happens to local perspectives on international stories?
- ∑ Does the resulting freedom of choice mean better news or just more of the same?

In this paper I will refer to studies I have carried out exploring those issues, in Cambodia in 1993, in Hong Kong for the Handover in 1997, in Australia in 2001, and in cyberspace in 2002. I will also refer to an as yet unpublished paper which examines techniques of media manipulation deployed in the 2003 Iraq war.

Local perspectives ignored in Cambodia

I went to Cambodia in 1993 to conduct a case study on how the Australian press covered Southeast Asia in general, and the Cambodian elections in particular. At that time Khmer Rouge Radio was still broadcasting from up in the mountains. They spoke in the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution —† referring to ‘running dogs’, ‘traitors’ and socialist objectives.

Down in Phnom Penh, correspondents used to savour the cool of the evenings sitting in the hotel roof gardens, drinking Cointreau and watching the swallows change shift with bats as dusk arrived. The nearby rooftops were covered in a spider web of television cables linked to communal satellite dishes. As the sun went down, the roof top televisions came on. The locals were watching Hong Kong quiz shows, American sitcoms, and models in sports cars. I realised then that hardly anyone was listening to the Khmer Rouge anymore.

Globalisation had arrived, exposing the Khmer Rouge worldview to the international market of ideas. Journalism, wrapped up in modern consumerism, appeared to have triumphed over bleak propaganda.

However, a study of the international foreign press indicated that local perspectives were ignored as foreign journalists strove to serve their western audiences. I found, for example, that most Australian correspondents covering those Cambodian elections reported almost exclusively on what turned out to be an imaginary military threat from the Khmer Rouge. The Australian press mostly ignored the issues the Cambodians themselves thought important, particularly the Buddhist peace movement. Notably, this movement mustered a several thousand strong march through the streets of Phnom Penh, led by an Australian based refugee who also happened to be the Cambodian Buddhist patriarch.(Knight:2001)

Australian correspondents I surveyed and interviewed were critical of their country’s coverage of Asia. They blamed:

- Σ lack of resources,
- Σ too few Asia based correspondents
- Σ lack of language skills among foreign reporters
- Σ ‘parachute’ journalists
- Σ editors’ ignorance of, or indifference to, “real” Asian issues.

Editors blamed:

- Σ Audience disinterest in certain types of Asian news
- Σ Deadline pressures
- Σ Sloppy or lazy reporting

But their collective failure to report on the Buddhists indicated that Western journalists were part of the problem; their narrow news values helped power a cycle of misinformation. For example, correspondents wrote stories international editors expected. Editors checked their reporters’ work against that of competing correspondents. The resulting published stories were read by subsequent generations of correspondents who set off to Asia feeling fully briefed. It’s virtually a case study of Edward Said’s ‘orientalism’ argument —† texts feeding off other texts, contemporary ‘facts’ feeding off earlier fictions.

Spin Controlling the Hong Kong Handover

In 1997, I went to Hong Kong, to co-write a book about the international coverage of the Handover. Hong Kong had been an outpost for the Western press almost since its inception. Its return to the heavily censored motherland was seen as a threat to freedom of speech.

However, once again state censorship was severely challenged if not defeated by the globalisation of the western cultural package, which includes news.

The Beijing based *People’s Daily* carried lengthy speeches by the leadership denouncing Britain for establishing Hong Kong after the Opium Wars, bitterly fought in Guangzhou province. However, an analysis of the *Guangzhou Daily* revealed a series of reports admiring Hong Kong lifestyle, adoring Hong Kong movie stars, and even advising the much-reviled Governor Patten on how he should invest his retirement package — “Don’t invest in China”, one said. “Write a book and go on a speaking tour!”

Hong Kong culture had hopped the China border some years previously, disabling Beijing propaganda before it had even been concocted. *Guangzhou Daily* journalists had access to the Internet. One told me, “We still have to carry stories from Beijing. But we see the Washington Post. We know the truth!”

Or at least something that looked more like the truth.

The international media coverage of the Handover had been strictly handled by Hong Kong’s British-style Government Information Service. It sought to control the global media by;

- ∑ Accreditation by invitation
- ∑ Balloted entry to events
- ∑ Limited or denied opportunities to ask questions
- ∑ Cordoned off press boxes

Restrictions on free information were balanced by spoon fed media releases including:

- ∑ A free officially sanctioned live global television feed
- ∑ A special website containing approved statements and speeches.

As a result, much of the handover coverage was a stage-managed affair, with scripted spectacle obscuring substantial issues.

Coralling CHOGM

The media handling for the Hong Kong Handover provided a template for press organization for subsequent international events, such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference held at Coolum in Queensland between March 2/5 this year.

CHOGM’s stated aim is “to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information across cultures and communities with the common goal of improving the futures of the people of the Commonwealth of Nations”. Yet if ideas were really exchanged at Coolum, then the resulting flow of information was strictly controlled.

Media accreditation to the Coolum event was offered to “journalists, broadcasters, photographers, film and television crews and technicians”. Those who were accepted after a security check were escorted by mini bus each day to a media tent equipped with

computers, telephones and internet links. Journalists received daily briefings from CHOGM public relations staff. (http://www.chogm2002.net/media/media_op_notes.html)

The actual CHOGM discussions were closed to the media. A pool system was established to enable camera crews “some opportunities” to collect soundless footage inside the conference room before the start of each session. The arrangement was designed to give the appearance of access while retaining strict control of journalists’ movements. Official footage was later shown on big screen televisions in the media tent, while statements and news releases were delivered by internet. Meanwhile, journalists were only able to ask questions of leaders who chose to attend media briefings, or who agreed to individual interviews. Greg Sheridan said that most of the time the accredited journalists were forced “to sit around and do nothing in great comfort”:

When you did arrange an interview you would have to find an official who would kit you out in this bizarre yellow bib which made you feel and look like some sort of spastic volleyball player ... It sat most uncomfortably over a normal business suit. It was to identify you as a member of the media. You couldn't just go over and see the people you knew. You had to be driven. In my case that was always a member of the armed forces. The security official would stay with you until they handed you over to the people from the country you wanted to see. The Singaporeans relieved me of that ridiculous yellow bib which I was instructed to wear so that I would not be mistaken for a terrorist. It affects your psychological standing with your interview subject. The result of all this was there was almost no informal access to leaders at CHOGM. (Sheridan 2002)

In both Hong Kong and Coolum, modern multi media was deployed to contain the reporting of the event by restricting journalists’ coverage.

While journalists may have been equipped deliver news globally, they were denied the ability to deploy conventional news-gathering techniques. The provision of internet delivered transcripts, photos, videos, audios and media releases, had the effect of undercutting reporters' independence, allowing editors to replace reporters' copy with officially sanctioned internet-delivered material.

The reporters at CHOGM may have had freedom of speech, but they found there was little to speak about.

Reliance on secondary sources

This style of media handling has helped make journalists even more reliant on official sources. A survey which I conducted in 2001 of members of the Foreign Correspondents Association of Australia confirmed that this elite group of journalists were becoming increasingly dependent on the internet as a source for their stories. Indeed, foreign correspondents based in Australia have rated web sites as their most useful source of information. The government funded broadcaster, ABC Radio, was rated as the equally most useful source. ABC Television was rated third most useful. Quality newspapers — the

Sydney Morning Herald (rated equal first),

The Australian Financial Review (rated second), and *The Australian* (rated fourth) — continued to be a major, if not the most important source for correspondents. Correspondents noted the importance of newspaper-linked websites as accessible, updated sources of “branded” information.

Primary sources — public servants (rated fifth), non government organisations (rated 6th), corporations (rated 7th), and politicians (rated 8th) — rated highly, but less so than the leading news outlets.

The internet search engine, Yahoo (rated 9th), was seen as more useful than diplomats (rated 10th), the domestic Australian newsagency, Australian Associated Press (rated 11th), the

Age newspaper (rated 12th), government newsletters (rated 13th), CNN (rated 14th), and the BBC World Service (rated 15th).

This result indicated the growing importance of the interactive Internet as a source of information for journalists. It also confirmed correspondents' reliance on secondary sources, often depending on what local media reported rather than going direct to the source.

China Radio Australian Pacific Correspondent, Yang Pin Yuan, said that the Internet was his first stop in his daily check of Australian media:

I start the day by switching on the computer to see what has happened overnight. I start to read the newspapers. I spend an hour on this each day and then I follow up by telephone. I am reading the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Australian*, the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* every day. It is difficult for me to say which is the best. They are all generally good but sometimes a certain paper is better on certain stories. The *Sydney Morning Herald* has a good online edition, which sometimes provides more background information than the paper itself. I go out three or four times a week to attend media events. Sydney is quite a busy place so we often get news to report first hand. (Yang 2002)

Terrorism.com

While governments are using the internet to provide source materials which bypass foreign correspondents' news gathering, non government organizations are establishing their own net-based news services to reach audiences directly. Last year, I conducted a study of how even certain terrorist groups, proscribed by the US State Department, established websites to deliver a global message.

The study located five hard core terrorist groups with extensive web sites systems. I will refer to two here.

The Sri Lankan based Tamil Tigers uses interlinked sites grounded in, and reflecting, disparate Tamil expatriate communities, to deliver news style propaganda explicitly designed to provide a party controlled alternative to mainstream news coverage of the conflict. Since the material is aimed directly at the sectional interests of these Tamil communities, such reporting is more detailed and comprehensive than competing reports created independently by news agencies or other mainstream news organizations.

The Tigers' websites play an important additional role as an international fund raising device, selling videos, books and even greeting cards celebrating suicide bombings.

However, perhaps the potential of web-based multimedia was most successfully exploited by the right wing Zionist group which maintains the

Kahane.org web site. This site includes more traditional news reports, media statements, colour photographs and even specialist cartoons. But it also calls on browsers to buy t shirts, posters and other propagandised merchandise. Furthermore, the site encourages interaction in the form of:

- ∑ Forums and chat groups
- ∑ Emailed campaigns lobbying the US congress
- ∑ Children's games which allow players to use Yasser Arafat as a moving target.

Terrorist groups have embraced the Internet as a means of transmitting propaganda, raising cash, recruiting new members and communicating with their activists.

The point is, the Internet has encouraged a shift in who creates, distributes and ultimately owns the news. It increasingly shapes the ways journalists communicate, construct their stories, publish their material and interact with their audiences. But it also allows radical groups, who might have previously relied on small audiences, easily censored and suppressed newspapers, radio or television stations, to bypass journalists and offer their intellectual wares directly to an international audience.

Indeed the organisation of the most notorious of the international terrorist groups, al Qaeda, may be seen to parallel the structure of the Internet. In that:

- Σ It is transnational
- Σ It lacks a geographic centre
- Σ It consists of disparate nodes or activist cells
- Σ It depends on the software of ideas rather than military hardware.

As a result, al Qaeda, like the internet, is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. As national, geographically centred, hierarchical governments have found it difficult to control and censor the web, the USA has found it difficult to identify and eliminate al Qaeda.

Packaging the Iraq war

President George Bush launched the invasion of Iraq as part of the US 'war against terror'. In retrospect the war must be seen not merely as a military victory, but also as the triumph of a sophisticated information superpower over a crude third world communication apparatus.

The International Federation of Journalists condemned both sides in the Iraq invasion for "crimes of war" against journalists. "It is cruelly ironic that after the Iraqi regime plays cat-and-mouse with Al Jazeera, first banning them, then allowing them to stay, it appears they have been attacked by American forces," said Aidan White, the IFJ's General Secretary. The IFJ said the attack on the Baghdad offices was a shocking mirror of the earlier destruction of the Kabul offices of Al Jazeera by American forces during the war in Afghanistan. "It is impossible not to detect a sinister pattern of targeting," said White. ([IFJ Media Release 8.04.2003](#))

According to the US Government's Office for Global Communications, the Iraqis deployed eleven "Main Tools of (Ö)Disinformation" :

- Σ Staged suffering and grief
- Σ Co-location of military assets
- Σ Restricting journalists' movements
- Σ False claims or disclosures
- Σ False man-in-the-street interviews
- Σ Self-inflicted damage
- Σ On-the-record lies
- Σ Covert dissemination of false stories
- Σ Censorship
- Σ Bogus, edited, or old footage and images
- Σ Fabricated documents

The United States itself deployed three tools.

Firstly there was the Office of Global Communications itself, established by the Whitehouse in 2002, to advise US government agencies on reaching foreign audiences with “simple but powerful” pro-US messages (OGC 2003)

In doing so, the OGC recognised the ability of globalised television networks and news exchanges between agencies to rapidly juxtapose apparently divergent statements by US spokespeople located across different continents. Conventional journalism routinely seeks such contradictions, as a way of exposing untruths. To negate this journalism methodology, the OGC advised US officials to deliver similar, OGC scripted sound bites to questioning journalists.

To meet journalists’ demand for regular updates, delivering content for current stories, the OGC distributed daily “facts sheets”, *The Global Messenger*, and co-ordinated “rapid response to allegations and rumors in the war on terror”.

Secondly, it created an international media centre at coalition central command in Dohar.

Hundreds of kilometres from the action, these CDHQ based journalists attended daily briefings staged by crisp and articulate American and British commanders. Sustained critical questioning was almost impossible in the competitive yet strictly controlled news conferences created to sustain an illusion of openness. The conferences were held within a military base with access restricted to accredited (security cleared) journalists. The presenter would appear with a prepared script on a stage designed to accentuate authority. Journalists competed with each other to ask questions. The presenter was able to terminate the process at any time.

In a safe, clean and well-connected environment, the Dohar centre developed the central themes around which global television presenters might string together the random and more specific action pictures created by embedded correspondents.

CENTCOM’s *Public Affairs Guidance on Embedding Media*

recognised that media coverage of the war would “shape public perception of the national security environment now and in the years

ahead". ([Public Affairs Guidance, 2003](#)) More than five hundred journalists who lived, worked and travelled with selected units, were promised minimum restrictions and maximum access to combat information.

Embedded journalists were invited to join frontline units, and guaranteed communications to file their copy and images to the global networks demanding instantaneous news. In practice, the embedding process generated hundreds of visually exciting yet disparate keyhole views of the war. Stitching these vignettes to create credible analyses took time, which was in short supply in a blitzkrieg.

Embedded journalists were required to rely on military transport — a critical restriction in rapidly moving desert war. Yet these “eyewitness” reports implied veracity, while feeding media demands that their personalities might be seen as part of the unfolding action.

Conclusion

Foreign correspondents are in crisis: their role of independently recording, interpreting and transmitting news from distant places is at risk of transforming into that of mere actors in choreographed charades of ‘real’ news. They act out their parts as independent commentators, but in fact rely primarily on material prepared or at least contained by official sources.

This is not a new process.

However, government’s pre-emptive use of new technologies, such as globalised live television, increasingly turns the methodology of journalism against itself. In Hong Kong, international news presenters were able to appear back-dropped by key events, while in reality being excluded from them. In Iraq, reporters and presenters worked within templates which subtly constructed events within coalition themes.

Do the new globalised media technologies help or hinder good journalism?

On the plus side, globalisation of news helps demolish national censorship regimes which may have created state-constructed fantasies at odds with local realities — as in Cambodia and China. A free international market of ideas allows the participation of more sophisticated information vendors.

On the other hand, however, these same more sophisticated media handling techniques act to exclude journalists from directly witnessing the events they are supposed to report on. The pressures created by live global broadcasting force many to rely on accounts already prepared and sanctioned by the authorities.

And the Internet now allows news sources such as governments to distribute their own material directly to local news outlets. They bypass foreign correspondents and even international news wholesalers such as a news agencies.

What about the local perspectives on international stories?

Globalism may overwhelm local perspectives. Research shows that independent local sources are frequently ignored by foreign correspondents seeking to efficiently supply distant editors servicing home audiences. Even the best-equipped and trained foreign reporters may be hindered by lack of local knowledge or cultural insensitivity. Meanwhile, governments and NGOs exploit these journalists' weaknesses, avoiding reporters and delivering 'authorised' and unquestioned information to news audiences.

Does the resulting freedom of choice mean better news or just more of the same?

Currently, it's a toss-up whether the Internet offers utopian or dystopian futures.

In theory, competition allows news consumers to compare accounts and reject flawed reports. However, as we have seen, the free market of ideas can be influenced by the intentional construction and control of sources, as in Hong Kong, or apparent neglect, as in Australia. And consumerism is universally attractive, even when used to gift-wrap news. But many journalists already recognise that they have a responsibility not just to sell what their consumers may *want*, but also to deliver what citizens of a democracy may *need* —†in order to make informed decisions.

The Internet allows news consumers unprecedented access to sources. In theory and past practice, journalism's role is to sift and shortcut this global information apparatus on behalf of their local consumers. But for journalists to maintain this traditional vanguard role in the global communication arena —†providing authoritative analysis and factual

reporting in identifiable formats—†they face today a new, daunting task. They must address the challenges of the new technologies — developing multifaceted communications which combine text, audio, television and animation. At the same time, they must also retain the traditional attributes of accuracy, clarity and ethical reporting.

How well this task is achieved —†and the information paradoxes of the rapidly changing times we live in are resolved —†will determine the future of globalised journalism.

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