Everybody’s Business: Global Media, Intervention, and the Nation-State

In today’s “global village,” as Marshal McLuhan calls it, governments are no longer entirely free to mistreat citizens, journalists, rioters, and rebels. With the rise of new media (citizen journalism, blogs, Twitter, i-reports, and others), international watchdog organizations, including Reporters without Borders’ Freedom Index, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, among others, governments’ actions as well as their media systems are being monitored. Clearly, the Iranian authorities will have to appraise the consequences of a decision to execute a death sentence by stoning against Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani,\(^1\) a woman convicted of murder and adultery, especially because an international campaign led by her children, international human rights groups, and the global media have been calling to stop her execution.

Similarly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict carries today an ethical dimension more than ever before as the actions of both Israelis and Palestinians are being exposed to the whole world to see, and are monitored by media watchdogs and human rights organizations.

While the nation-state reaps many of the rewards of globalization, it is faced by the threats it poses to its sovereignty, cultural identity, and survival. As David Held puts it, “the operation of states in an ever more complex global system alters their autonomy by changing the balance between the costs and the benefits of policies and impinging on their sovereignty.”\(^2\) This scenario is indeed legitimate for globalization has obviously blurred the boundaries of domestic politics; it has changed the conditions of political and economic decision making because the

---


survival of nation-states largely depends on it. However, to what extent can one speak of the possibility of a state or international body intervening in the media space of another state? While no definite, clear-cut answers can be given, this essay argues that the world is witnessing two parallel yet dichotomous trends: on the one hand, the nation-state still reigns supreme, is protective of its cultural norms and values, and acts as a bulwark against threats to its sovereignty by other states and international bodies; on the other hand, states have to open up to the forces of globalization if they are to survive the consequences of modernity, and thus, will have to accommodate some degree of intervention and adjust their domestic policies accordingly.

While scholars have advanced many theoretical frameworks to analyze the effects of globalization on the world today, I am with the view that a neo-liberal global paradigm led by Western major powers tends to dominate the global map. This paradigm is the result of development and modernization theories which took off in the 1950s as part of the propaganda studies of post World War II. One of the main reasons which accounts for the dominance of the modernization paradigm includes the formation of newly independent states after decolonization, economic growth in Europe after industrialization, liberal/capitalist ideology, and America’s interest in bringing the less industrialized countries into the dominant capitalist social and economic system. The media were used as a tool in the process of development. The modernization perspective gave rise to media dependency theories, including media imperialism theory, influenced by the Marxist tradition, which blamed the developed world for keeping the South in a state of dependent development undertaken by the governments of the North through the market and the media industry.³

Thus, millions of people today are being subjected to the same media forms, products, and channels at the same time.\textsuperscript{4} Disney’s global presence alone extends to Europe, Asia, and the Middle East as well as Disney Channel Worldwide with 120 million subscribers in more than 70 countries. As of 2005, American and British newspapers have continued to dominate global print media. Publications such as Readers Digest, Cosmopolitan, Time, USA Today, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, and the International Herald Tribune still take the lead in world readership. Newswires, such as the Associated Press and Reuters control global news and information. With Agence France Presse, they provide 80 percent of global news. As to broadcast media, CNN and BBC are leaders in television news.\textsuperscript{5}

The dominance of the neo-liberal model accounts for the involvement of Western media companies and organizations with monitoring media in developing and transitional states as well as conducting training programs with the media institutions and professionals of these states to teach a “Western” media model. Reuters, the Associated Press, the BBC, and CNN are among the many media companies involved in training programs of journalists in developing countries. Media education and training also takes places through non-governmental organizations, such as IREX, among others, based in Washington D.C with offices around the world. Media development is among the organization’s focus areas. As stated on its website, IREX works with local partners to advance “media professionalism, sustainability, sound media laws, and the local institutions that support independent media and journalists…. as well as provide and integrate new technologies that democratize the flow of information.”\textsuperscript{6}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{4} R. Hackett and Y. Zhao, \textit{Democratizing global media : one world, many struggles} (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 6-7
\item\textsuperscript{5} Debeer Arnold S., ed. \textit{Global Journalism: Topical Issues and Media systems} (Boston: Pearson, 2009),117
\item\textsuperscript{6} \url{www.irex.org}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The above cases exemplify a kind of intervention by an international body in the media space of a state although the effect of such intervention is not clear. The extent to which media professionals in fact translate the skills learned, or are allowed to translate such skills into their own media environment remains to be investigated, for one ought to take into account the cultural environment in which media professionals operate as well as the social and political values that shape their understanding and production of media. In their classic, *The Four Theories of the Press*, Siebert, Peterson and Schram argue that the social system is the point of departure for any study, as it is reflective of the values pertinent to the system at hand. In their words, “the press takes the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates.”7 A good example of Siebert, Peter and Schram’s models today would be Arab regimes, where the press largely reflects social and political structures within which it operates. While it is true that Satellite TV industry, largely driven by profit, has boomed in the Arab world, including, among others, MBC, and al-Arabiya owned by the Saudi government, and Al-Jazeera, owned by Qatari government as well as Dubai’s media city,8 most Arab countries have authoritarian social and political structures and, therefore, closed media systems. The social systems are patriarchal, where the family-- the primary agency of socialization-- is governed by a male figure (father or brother). The product of this social system is a political system bearing the same characteristics. Thus, the media in most Arab countries are government-run and controlled by the ruling regime or party, as in the case of Syria,9 or government owned with some degree of private ownership and freedom such as the case of Egypt. One is inclined to ask whether such

9 BBC country profiles: Syria [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/country_profiles/801669.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/country_profiles/801669.stm) (accessed 20, Jan., 20110)
regimes, despite international monitoring of their media practices, are likely to adopt Western models that hardly reflect their values and norms.

While information technology spearheaded by globalization is threatening the nation-state, it is not clear how this threat manifests itself in a state’s domestic policy. China illustrates a good example of a media system, once shaped by the Communist model, now transitioning into a more open model in order reintegrate into the global economy and assert itself as a global power. China’s openness has invited news corporations, such as Viacom, and Sony pictures to undertake joint projects with Chinese media companies.\(^\text{10}\) However, when it comes to matters pertaining to threats to its own survival, the Chinese government does not seem to be willing to compromise its sovereignty. It did not hesitate to incriminate and imprison human rights activist Liu Xiabao, a leader in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests despite appeals for his release by the international community and the Nobel Peace committee who awarded him the Nobel Prize in 2010 for his struggle for human rights in China.\(^\text{11}\)

The dichotomy characterizing the relationship between the nation-state and the international community in the present global age cannot be easily resolved. While the forces of modernity are making state boundaries more porous, and thus, inviting international intervention in the domestic affairs of states, including their media space, such intervention is far from making tangible shifts in the practices of these states, especially when the increasing neo-liberal globalization of media has been criticized as being led by a few Western media industries—a fact which raises concerns about global democracy. While globalization has given supremacy to the West, it has equally triggered a revival of cultural awareness in other regions of the globe.


Media scholars argue that people everywhere prefer their own media, in their own language, for their own culture. According to Ms. Agnieszka Mosor-Kozlowska, a political reporter from the Polish PolSat TV station, Polish TV stations do broadcast American films and serials, but the texts are translated into Polish and adapted in a way as to suit the Polish audience. African notions of journalism have come into tension with the Western liberal notions of journalistic roles. After emerging from Apartheid, the media industry in Africa received foreign media behemoths, but this was met with a renewed awareness of local identity and national belonging.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, news networks such as Al-Jazeera in the Middle East and TeleSur in Latin America broadcast contra-flows of news to challenge the dominant Western networks like BBC and CNN. Jihad al Khazen, former editor in chief of the pan Arab daily al-Hayat, said Arab interest in Satellite TV was due to “the popularity of CNN's unrivaled coverage of the Gulf War, which opened the eyes of Gulf investors to the enormous potential of satellite TV.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Debeer Arnold S., ed. \textit{Global Journalism: Topical Issues and Media systems} (Boston: Pearson, 2009),117
\textsuperscript{13} Jihad el Khazen, "Censorship and state control of the press in the Arab world." \textit{Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics}, 4, n.3 (87).