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End of TV and Foreign Policy

Abstract

The transformation of television has altered the capacity of the state to control the agenda for making war, convening peace, and otherwise exercising its foreign policy options. In the age of the state gatekeeper, there was at least the illusion (and often the reality) that the government could substantially control the flow of images within its borders. With transformations in television systems, national systems of broadcast regulation have declined, replaced by transnational flows of information where local gatekeepers are not so salient. The rise of satellites with regional footprints and the spread of the Internet give governments the ability to reach over the heads of the state and speak directly to populations. Both receiving and sending states will have foreign policies about the meaning of the right to receive and impart information and the extent to which satellite signals can be regulated or channeled.

Keywords

diplomacy, public diplomacy, CNN effect, international broadcasting, free flow of information

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In the age of the state gatekeeper, there was at least the illusion (and often the reality) that the government could substantially control the flow of images within its borders. No foreign government's policy could reach local audiences in a massive and effective way.

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The rise of satellites with regional footprints and the spread of the Internet gives governments the ability to reach over the heads of the state directly and speak directly to populations. Both receiving and sending states will have foreign policies about the meaning of the right to receive and impart information and the extent to which satellite signals can be regulated or channeled. This process may have limits that are not yet well understood.

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Is there a specific kind of foreign policy that should be (more or less) identified with the classic era in broadcast television? If such a media-influenced foreign policy existed, has its content and approach been modified or altered because of transformations in communications technologies and distribution systems? There are two salient aspects, at least, when thinking about foreign policy and the media. The first is whether modern technological developments mean that foreign policy is increasingly affected by media concerns. The second is whether there is what might be called a foreign policy of media structures, namely an interest by one state (or the international community) in the mode by which media is developed through an interdependent set of nations. The answer to both questions is yes, and the issues are interconnected.

Think of the Cold War—or elements of it—mapped against the 1950s and 1960s structure of radio and television broadcasting. A claim might be that the Cold War was only possible in a period of (almost) hermetically sealed borders in which there were strong and centralized spheres of influence. In this telling, the effectiveness of the Berlin Wall depended on the very conditions that yielded to the increased information permeability of borders by media, the images of freedom projected through trans-border media. International broadcasting (the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the BBC World Service among others), relying on short-wave facilities, had helped to crack information monopolies, but the dam broke with the rise of satellite and the increase in spillover broadcasts from neighboring states. In parallel, one might argue, the system of scarce broadcasting with heavy licensing or state-connected public broadcasting systems in Western Europe and the United States allowed for the reinforcement of a national consensus against the Soviet threat.

A second, more general, claim, easier to substantiate, would be that any intelligent foreign policy, involved in relations with publics abroad (and maintaining support at home) would have a necessary relationship with changing structures of the media.¹ National identities—and interactions among states—are consequences, in part, of media and communications systems. The concept of an effective national identity, associated with a state, presupposes a kind of information system that produces it. And that information system may have, as part of its composition, narratives about the place of the state in the world. As information systems alter, indeed alter substantially, it might be assumed that there are knock-on effects for national identities and for the states with which such identities are politically central. Television is only a small part of an information system or set of systems that are used to produce national identities. But even so, reorganizations in the mode of making, distributing and controlling television images yield consequences for those fashioning attitudes towards the greater world.

To understand how the “end of television” in its classic sense may have implications for diplomacy and public diplomacy, a few initial words about these terms are in order. The historic element of foreign policy is the diplomatic interaction among officials of two or more states; “public diplomacy” seeks to bypass the state and reach directly to audiences. How the balance between the two has changed with altered

television technology is implicated in the “CNN effect.” The term was first used during the Gulf War of 1990. With the rise of CNN and its 24-hour style of reporting, it was argued, leaders learned more from television than from their own officials about what was going on in the battlefield (and in the diplomatic sphere). Leaders could conduct diplomacy in real time, and in the fishbowl of a global news service they could directly reach past official and autocratic gatekeepers to broad civil publics. Steven Livingston has listed three potential shifts because of this phenomenon: media as a) an enhanced agenda setter (where the media trump the agenda-setting effort of the government; b) an impediment to policy-making (where the existence of the media effect narrows or forecloses options open to the government; and c) an accelerant to policy decision-making (where the impact of media coverage forces the government to take an action it might otherwise not have been inclined to (Livingston 1998).

The case most often cited for the “CNN effect” is 1992-1993 in Somalia. Graphic pictures of starving children led to the humanitarian effort of President George Bush who sent in American military; almost a year later, similarly graphic pictures of a gang desecrating the body of an American and dragging it through the streets led President Bill Clinton to announce that the United States would be leaving Somalia. Television brought the Americans in and television forced the Americans out.

There has been much controversy over the extent of the CNN effect and its transformation of the diplomatic sphere. Several conclusions can be drawn. First, most of those who seek to shape multiple foreign policies or react to them have internalized the phenomenon of global news services and have adjusted their behavior. What was most striking about the supposed impact of media in the early 1990s was the novelty of the new opportunities it presented. Like militaries seeking to cope with new weaponry, diplomats had to adjust to an altered media world. Once they had done so, once they could more consciously calibrate the consequence of various appearances on global news services, the transformative impact of the new technology was lessened. Second, the impact of the changes have now extended far beyond CNN: Al Jazeera and multiple other broadcasters are now competing for the attention of international publics, and the resulting impact that this reach could have on foreign policy. While the internalization of

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the changed media environment works toward reducing the CNN effect, the continued expansion of global broadcasters works toward increasing it.

The CNN phenomenon tended to locate the broadcaster as the independent variable, and the leaders, governments and publics as the dependent variables. We now see a broader interplay among leaders, governments and publics than was identified in connection with the CNN effect, but the examination of a foreign policy of the media sphere demonstrates how almost all aspects are interdependent. James Hoge has argued that the impact of the media is greatest when there is a humanitarian crisis and there is an effort to mobilize a domestic community to press its officials to take action (Hoge 1994). Hoge sees a special impact as well where a broadcast shows, to a government's domestic audience, a sustained set of images that, through its tragic and dramatic force, undermines the narrative of success that officials have proclaimed. Here such a broadcast narrative can impede or accelerate government action or it can alter the agenda. The issue can be put differently. The ubiquity of media and their capacity to provide unfiltered access to harsh global events increases emotional impact (and an emotional impact not constructed or controlled by the government or its gatekeepers). This is not to say that foreign policy has always been based entirely on reason and conducted in an environment wholly immunized from public opinion. But, at certain times, and subject to the varying skills of international players, media can foreshorten time for reflection and raise spectacularly the way the stakes are perceived and governments are measured.

As significant, perhaps, is the impact that changed broadcasting technology and structure have had on public diplomacy. There are elements of the conduct of foreign policy where public opinion plays little if any role. But the proportion of foreign policy initiatives that involve influencing the public (so as to influence leaders) seems to have increased. There is a new imperative for reaching out to publics, changing hearts and minds, and engaging in soft power. New technologies enable and, as a result of competition, virtually require that states have a strategy to deal with foreign audiences (Dizard 2004).

For decades, states have invested in persistent and large-scale "international broadcasting" efforts to subsidize radio (and later television) that would alter the flow of

ideas in a target society. The Voice of America and Deutsche Welle emerged during World War II; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the BBC World Service were established during the Cold War. But the process of developing government-subsidized efforts for radio and television that reaches a global audience has altered greatly with technological and political change.

The strongest of these international services, like the U.S.-funded Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (established as “surrogate radios” in the Cold War, ostensibly to provide information-deprived populations with access to news and information about their own society) and the BBC World Service, financed by the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office, had extensive ambitions that were tied to foreign policy goals (sometimes only the goal of greater access to information, but sometimes more). In the early 21st century, the U.S. foreign policy question was which of these services to maintain and at what level; put differently, whether given scarce resources, international broadcasting efforts to reach, inform and persuade should be redirected from the former Soviet Union towards target publics elsewhere, such as the Middle East.

Subsidy on a large scale is used to determine what languages, what technologies and what groups to persuade. In the 1990s, Serbia invested in a satellite service to reach its diaspora and gain moral and financial support for its position; Hungary, after its transition, created Duna TV to reach ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania (Romania). In 1996, Qatar, in a novel use of funds, established Al Jazeera and altered the media face of the Middle East. Other governments in the region, including Saudi Arabia, saw to it that their satellite presence was bolstered. Western governments, seeking to reach the “hearts and minds” of Arabic youth across borders, have responded in kind: the BBC, France 24, Deutsche Welle and Russia TV today have launched or expanded their Arabic-language television offerings, and the United States limps along with al Hurra, its entry into the competition among Arabic satellite channels for the privilege of defining “news” and presenting a stronger image of the United States (Heil 2007). Even independent satellite services are tied to government-related interests. Beginning with the post-Soviet transition, Western nations have subsidized (or invested in) the development of an indigenous media in transitioning societies as part of the process of democratization. Without being too reductionist, the United States has emphasized the development of

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“free and independent media” as an integral part of this process, while the UK has preferred to focus on strengthening public service broadcasters. In some transitional contexts, this odd Great Powers contestation has led to temporary stalemates. It is not clear that there is a formula that works.

Shifts in broadcasting technologies and distribution systems have had limited impact on these elements of foreign policy, the foreign policy of broadcasting structures and the transformations of international broadcasting. Undoubtedly, institutions like the BBC World Service and the Voice of America will change substantially because of the Internet and satellite, but the existing relationships, the confidence in the existing method of reaching audiences, and institutional inertia has meant less change than might have been expected. For some target societies, the “end of tv” in the classic sense of broadcasting has not yet occurred.

There is yet another way to look at the structure of broadcasting and foreign policy: through the lens of the global debate over information flows and development. The 1970s and 1980s involved competing policies (with the United States often in opposition to many other states) over the proper information system to support political, economic and social growth. Notions of “modernization” (Lerner 1958; McClelland 1961; Rogers 1962; Schramm 1964) competed as a basis for policy debates with ideas of eliminating “dependence” (emphasizing decolonialization and liberation) (Baran 1957; Dos Santos 1970; Frank 1969; Galtung 1971). Anthony Giddens (1990) argued for the important role that media culture plays in the development of world markets, the cohesion of the nation-state, the perception of military blocs and the capacity to industrialize.

In this global debate, “the free flow of information” became an aspect of foreign policy for some countries in the West, particularly the United States. As Ulla Carlsson has written, the concept of the free flow of information captured U.S. attitudes after World War II. Under the U.S. position, national frontiers should not be allowed to hinder the flow of information between countries. Prior to World War II, the media and entertainment corporations in the United States had only limited access to media markets in the extensive territories under the control of colonial powers such as Great Britain .

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After the War, “The U.S. saw before them a world without colonial ties, a world that lay open for an expansive economy in the U.S. The information sector was a key factor in paving the way for economic expansion” (Carlsson 2003, 6).

In the 1970s, advocates of “free flow” found increasing resistance at UNESCO and the United Nations Assembly, especially from non-aligned and developing countries that had a very different set of starting points in terms of shaping their own national identities in the fresh era of independence. A report from a UN symposium at the time noted:

Since information in the world shows a disequilibrium favouring some and ignoring others, it is the duty of non-aligned countries and other developing countries to change this situation and obtain the de-colonization of information and initiate a new international order in information (Carlsson 2003, 11)

All of this set the stage for the appointment of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, known as the MacBride Commission, following the 1976 UNESCO General Conference. It is impossible to summarize adequately the findings and the consequent debate over the MacBride Commission, but it encapsulated a “foreign policy” of media structuring. For the Commission, Cees Hamelink defined a new international information order as an international exchange of information in which states develop their cultural system in an autonomous way, have sovereign control of resources and fully and effectively participate as independent members of the international community (Hamelink 1979). The MacBride Commission and the proceedings following its submission became a lightning rod for voices in the United States, Great Britain and elsewhere that sought to implement global processes that reflected the principles of free flow of information. So sharp was the discord over these questions, so committed was U.S. foreign policy, that the government withdrew from UNESCO, not returning for 19 years until 2003.

The End of TV is marked by the decline of state control over information space. As that occurs, voluntary negotiations among states (or between states and media conglomerates) concerning the flow of certain categories of information (for example,

hate speech, pornography and information related to national security) increase—as do new means for states to reinstate their authority. Historically, states have had a tacit agreement that the media of one state would not persistently permeate the boundaries of another. The International Telecommunication Union was, in a sense, created to help police the allocation of spectrum so that, for the most part, radio (and then television) signals would be contained within national boundaries. Short-wave efforts designed at first to reach subjects around a colonial world were an exception to this general rule. While there were accepted and less accepted violations of the general principle, it was only with the arrival of the satellite (and to a lesser extent cable) that the general understanding disintegrated. And even then, there were attempts (at the UN and elsewhere) to transfer to the satellite regime the state-protective elements of terrestrial radio and television.

The 1982 UN resolution concerning direct television broadcasting sought to encourage consultation between broadcasting states and receiving states (UN General Assembly 1982). The Television Without Frontiers Directive of 1989 (and the subsequent revisions of 1997 and 2007), governing members of the European Union, is an example of a more successful operative effort to establish a regime that mediates information crossing the relevant boundaries. Article 22 requires bilateral consultations where a member state hosts programs that significantly impair the moral development of children in a receiving member state, thus imposing a limit (though only an extremely narrow one) on the circumstances in which one member state can allow signals to flow, without objection, into the territory of another (Crauford Smith 1997).

In addition to bilateral and multilateral negotiations between states, there are other unofficial (and often much less transparent) forms of negotiation among states and between states and broadcasting entities or distributors to limit or affect the impact of transborder information flow.

This hidden “foreign policy” of the media reflects changes in media technologies. New competitors are much more dependent on agreements with states or with gatekeeper broadcast entities within states than is realized. Domestic structures are the pillars upon which global media systems are built. The television signals of CNN or BBC do not simply waft through the air, encountering no controllable gatekeeper before they invade

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the collective local consciousness. Today, to understand the actions of News Corporation or MTV, or the competition between CNN and BBC World, we must look at the domestic structures in the receiving countries, structures upon which dependence often still exists. We must see how shifts in those pillars are used to temper the entry of the global players. Indeed, “law,” in the sense of officially-developed norms that control behavior, may be less often the result of unilaterally declared statute or regulation than of negotiation.

These negotiations take place in the midst of two transitions: the transformation of scope and scale among the producers of channel services and programming who seek to distribute signals transnationally, and the transformation of the structure of receiving mechanisms that exist as gatekeepers and filters within every country. For music video channels to gain entry into certain markets, or to gain shelf space on cable or in a bouquet of channels carried by a direct-to-home provider, the channel must negotiate the program content with the provider. There is usually no explicit legal standard at the base of such negotiations: channels may promise that they will confine themselves to entertainment and not carry news, not as a result of formal law but as an informal condition for entry. Another example are negotiations between international broadcasters and local transmission facilities. Formal or informal arrangements between states and large-scale international news organizations will become more frequent, implicating contractual ties with governments to operate terrestrial transmitters, to broadcast via the national system, or merely to gather information. Increasingly, states seek to regulate who has access to transponders or uplink facilities.

There are an increasing number of such negotiations to protect information space. Some of the most well-known examples are between the receiving state and the large multinational private broadcasting firms. In 1995, India agreed, in an arrangement that soon fell apart, to permit CNN to broadcast on a favored Doordarshan frequency if CNN agreed that the Indian broadcasting host would provide most of the news about its own domestic affairs (Page and Crawley 2001). China agreed to more extensive entry for Star-TV but, in apparent exchange, Star-TV’s parent, News Corporation, agreed that the BBC would not be carried. It is extremely likely that MTV, the popular global music television service, negotiates to ensure that it is cognizant of and, to the necessary extent,

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abides by local custom and preference in its choice of music, music videos, and hosts. More confident post-Soviet Republics negotiated with Russia to admit Russian language programming under approved circumstances. Similarly, a meeting of information ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) served, even before the war in Afghanistan, as the arena to mediate disputes between Qatar, the home of outspoken satellite broadcaster Al-Jazeera, and the government of Bahrain, which considered Al-Jazeera's broadcasts deleterious and violative of the public order (BBC 1999).

Other efforts have focused not on the broadcaster itself but on the distribution channel. One example is the story of MED-TV, the satellite service established in 1994 in the UK, which targeted Kurdish populations worldwide, but particularly in Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Turkey contended that MED-TV was a "political organization" that supported the PKK, widely characterized as a terrorist organization, and attempted to suppress MED-TV unilaterally by policing the purchase and mounting of satellite dishes within Turkey's borders. Failing at this, Turkey was required to employ a bilateral strategy to stifle the MED-TV channel: officials mounted a campaign to pressure the British government to withdraw MED-TV's license and sought, in other European capitals, to deny MED-TV leasing rights on government-controlled transponders on Eutelsat.

International human rights norms, such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which outlines the right to receive and impart information, can be said to be part of an international "foreign policy" of media structures. States have utilized Article 19 to press for a greater range of domestic voices, especially in societies that are thought to be authoritarian or oppressive of domestic minorities. The general proscription against hate speech and bilateral agreements to adjust media use in the interest of peace is another example. In the ill-fated Oslo Accords, part of the Middle East Peace Process, there were mutual undertakings by Israel and the Palestinian Authority to seek a media sphere that was more conducive to sustained amity. Increasingly, regional efforts, such as the Arab Satellite Broadcasting Charter adopted in February 2008, try (often in vain) to control the implications of new technologies for multilateral relations. The power of images will create novel ways, in the future, for foreign policy goals and the uses of media to intertwine.

Conclusion

From the perspective of foreign policies, there are implications of transformations in television systems. The major change is the seeming decline of national systems of broadcast regulation and the rise of transnational flows of information where local gatekeepers are not so salient. In the age of the state gatekeeper, there was at least the illusion (and often more) that the government could substantially control the flow of images within its borders. No foreign government's policy could reach local audiences in a massive and effective way. States could play with this system around the edges, through international broadcasting, cultural exchanges and other devices. But the system was maintained, almost by common understanding among the powers.

The rise of satellites with regional footprints, the forest of dishes in major cities where diasporic groups live and the spread of the Internet and Internet cafes gives governments the ability, if they are clever enough (which few may actually be) to reach over the heads of the state directly and speak directly to populations. This process may have limits that are not yet well understood, as states intent on control regulate the use of dishes or the carriage of signals on transponders. States will have foreign policies about the meaning of the right to receive and impart information and the extent to which satellite signals can be regulated or channeled.

Finally, the transformation of television has—at least to the extent the CNN Effect is alive—altered the capacity of the state to control the agenda for making war, convening peace and otherwise exercising its foreign policy options. As broadcasters become more abundant, more diverse, and more partisan, the locus and substance of debate on global issues shifts. Oddly, states may opt for greater commercialization to counter this danger of lack of control or seek other means to restore systems to the status quo ante.

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ⁱ For a general introduction, see Nye 2004.