

Media in Cosmopolis

Hans-Jörg Trenz and Erik O. Eriksen*
ARENA, University of Oslo

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The information age has introduced a new era of global communication. Media are becoming increasingly borderless and turn the world into one single place. The Internet provides instant access to global information and enables everybody to publish to the world. Virtual communication anywhere is communication everywhere. Traditional audiovisual media too become increasingly embedded in global communication networks. Through worldwide news broadcasting, political events are re-contextualised within an emerging global space of meaning.



The global newsroom shapes public opinion and attitudes, and contributes to shared concerns and problem perceptions. For the first time in history, global citizenship and a global identity becomes thinkable. The cosmopolitan idea — that individuals, not states or nations, form the basis of political power — fits with the journalistic ethos of seeking truth and justice through universal communication.

With this enthusiasm in the new possibilities of the media to open boundless spaces, we forget about the high costs and side effects of media globalisation, which is first and foremost different from media cosmopolitanisation. The cosmopolitan society represents a vague promise, while the effects of economic globalisation are forthright. What is at stake here is the integrity of the national public sphere as a bounded space of collective opinion and will formation. This is where the promise of a media speaking to the whole of the nation once was to be fulfilled. Free and unbiased news reporting was to be guaranteed by a public sphere where the same issues were discussed at the same time and under the same criteria of relevance.

A closer look at the processes of political news production is discomfoting when confronted with this ideal description of the national public sphere. Long term trends point to a deep crisis of quality journalism in contemporary Europe. One main reason can be found in the falling quota of quality news products. Quality news is expensive news and the complexity of the world requires informed, well paid, journalists. In all Western countries, quality newspapers have experienced a dramatic decrease in readership. The battle for the attention of the audience has notably also led to a change of news formats. Media advertisement and images replace rational debates and discourse. Infotainment may reach a broader

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audience, but changes politics from substance to spectacle. It also contributes to the increasing personalisation of politics and to the rise of new populist leaders who excel in simplifying political messages to their audiences.

Under such conditions, it should come as no surprise that many traditional news media surrender when faced with the complexity of the world. The dumbing down of news quality is a major constraint to the cosmopolitanisation of the media. Media's inherent nationalism is made responsible for the re-interpretation of issues of global or transnational concern within contextualised systems of meaning. Through the effects of mediatisation, world discourse is re-fragmented into national discourse. Political journalism develops within a contextualised political culture and reproduces its dominant values and interpretations. This nationalistic and ethnocentric bias comes to bear above all in foreign news interests over normative ideals of a just world order. In a number of countries, the share of foreign news in traditional media formats has recently even been shrinking. The average reader does not know more, but less, about the world today than before.

All this implies that the traditional symbiosis between the media and democracy is turned into an increasingly ambivalent relationship. Media call for democracy and democratisation but media also increasingly restrain democratic procedures and practice. There is a concern with the colonisation of politics through the media, which at the same time is a concern with the colonisation of democracy through the media: a transformation of parliamentarian-representative democracy into media democracy. In its extreme version, power is exclusively tied to the media competence and performance of political actors.

What kind of remedy can be offered to the expanding media malaise? The protection of the national public sphere against the world disorder and complexity is definitely not the solution. The national public sphere is already internally corroding; not because it has failed to sufficiently protect its borders, but because it still operates through mainstream media nationalism, which restricts public views and visions and, by implication, democracy.

The media's provincialism will no longer avail in a world with interdependent national and global arenas. When a caricature in a Danish newspaper begets global repercussions, democracy – understood as the self-rule of a sovereign people – becomes problematic. The notion of national sovereignty safeguarding constitutional rule and thus making democracy possible and legitimate, and in turn protecting the rights and interest of the citizens, does not suffice. In this traditional model, communication stops at the national borders. We therefore need to think simultaneously about ways of reconstituting democracy within, as well as beyond the nation state. The national and the international levels are mutually dependent, and both depend on the media. There will be no national democracy that is not at the same time open to the world, and there will be no cosmopolitan democracy that does not at the same time respect difference.

Our proposal is that serious efforts should be done to turn media globalisation into a cosmopolitan media democracy. This is a task that is built on common standards of the quality and impartiality of news but also requires some degree of legal guarantees and protection through international law and organisations. The protection of the freedom of expression and the independence of the media are also acute concerns, making the EU a natural addressee for such measures. Today, it is not first and foremost the threat of state intervention that must be averted, but rather the threat posed by the market logic. In a globalised media market, one can no longer rely on self-regulating dynamics of an autonomous public sphere to ensure quality and sustain the informational value of political news. In Scandinavia,

government subsidies have indeed been important in ensuring the supply of information.

It is therefore important to recognize that global communication is different from cosmopolitan communication. The former creates visions of threats, heterogeneous values and antagonistic national interests. Cosmopolitan communication, on the other hand, establishes notions of shared responsibility and common problems that call for collective action. Here we are talking about the construction of a cosmopolis, that is, an order of democratic self-rule beyond the nation state. Such an order requires responsibility – that political actors can be held to account, and that we can identify our fellow citizens.

In order to hold the providers of information accountable, a concerted effort by journalists with a cosmopolitan inclination and their co-players is needed. The cosmopolitan community of journalists can rely on plethora of sources and exchange of information across national borders. Such a network of global exchange can no longer be easily manipulated by single governments. Emerging monopolies within one country could be broken up from outside, if audiences can opt for exit from their media system and for consumption of alternative news. Then, the mediated communication is no longer a hindrance, but rather an opportunity for creating solidarity and building communities across borders.

Last but not least, the cosmopolitan media democracy is relying on a new 'ethos of responsibility' of the journalists to speak to the citizen of the world and to appeal for solidarity with strangers. As the carrier of the cosmopolitan impulse, journalists should be interested in individuals, not only in states. They should identify new audience in terms of concerns that can be linked again to people and to particular spaces and are no longer identical to the traditional patterns of media consumption. Virtual communication is then no longer an obstacle but a chance for the formation of solidarity and the building of community and allegiance across borders.