



News and the Grand Narrative: some further reflections

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As a historian, I sometimes surprise my journalist colleagues by suggesting that the journalist and the historian are really cousins. They are most definitely not brothers or sisters—but cousins. After all, we are both ultimately interested in the same thing, namely the truth. Historians and, perhaps more significantly, social scientists frequently rely upon journalists to write the first rough draft of history. It is, admittedly, a very rough draft which historians have subsequently to correct. But the rules of operation for the news report and for the subsequent historical record are quite different. The journalists have to operate to a deadline measured in hours, minutes or even increasingly in real-time which denies them the opportunity to sift, evaluate and reflect on the story they are reporting.

We may speculate on the consequences of this, from ‘dumbing down’ of the news to the temptations of downright speculation by non-specialised multipurpose reporters. Certainly the pressures of instantaneous, technologically driven news in a global competitive environment are redefining our traditional conceptions of news. It is likely, therefore, that the historian who enjoys those very spatial and temporal luxuries denied the journalist will have a greater task in the future when it comes to re-rewriting these first rough drafts. For the historian, context remains essential but, for the journalist—perhaps more so for the electronic reporter than the editorial or op-ed writer—this appears to dropping down the list of priorities. Does this mean that the considerable intellectual and practical symmetry is likely to remain unchanged?

Historians are quite rightly nervous about becoming futurologists—which is why no-one predicted the end of the Cold War—but perhaps we need increasingly to show more courage in our convictions about predicting possible outcomes based upon our reading of past trends. Journalists have always tried to do this from their reading of current affairs and, perhaps—because of their ever-compressing deadlines—it could be argued that they now do it so badly that they should not do it at all. We may lament the decline of the specialised foreign or defence correspondent, the rise in journalistic speculation, the increasing preoccupation with human interest stories and the shifting of news programmes to accommodate more entertainment scheduling. Perhaps, as the Kosovo crisis revealed, we may in the future rely less and less on traditional sources of news about the happenings of the world around us and rely more and more on the information provided via new communications technologies such as the Internet. But we should remember that, throughout the history of communications technologies, everyone who has invented a new medium has made exaggerated claims for what it is going to do. Marconi said that radio would unite the peoples of the world, Arthur C. Clarke made similar claims for the potential of satellites and now of course we are hearing all sorts of fantastic claims about the potential of the Internet. When Godfrey Hodgson was speaking about his grand narrative, I confess I thought I was hearing

about a new 'end of history' thesis, but in fact, as it unfolded in its Hobsbawm-like interpretation of the period 1914–1991, it does strike me as an appropriate analogy that helps us finally to put a seal on a past that is already being revealed as very different—as a quite distinctive period of history—from the times we are currently living through.

The futurologist who was in fact closer than anybody else to predicting the end of this grand narrative was Alvin Toffler in his 1980 book *The Third Wave*. Godfrey Hodgson also talked about waves. He spoke about the development of technology leading into institutions and then about their cultural impact. Toffler's 'waves' analogy referred to the change of first-wave agricultural societies into second-wave industrial societies and, finally, into our current third wave of 'post-modern' or informational societies. Over the years, I have noticed just how influential this thesis has become in high-level official and military circles, particularly in Washington, although less so in academic circles. More recently, Toffler's latest book, co-written with his wife, *War and Anti-war*, has had a similar influence in the corridors of power. Indeed, it has become almost a Bible for governmental thinking about the information age, leading as it does from its premise that the way states make money also reflects the way they make war and, therefore, future peace. Thus, informational societies will wage information warfare and conduct diplomacy via informational operations. We shall see. Still, Kosovo was the first Internet war.

No historian likes rigid chronological divisions. Periods do not end abruptly, nor do their characteristics suddenly change or disappear. The most interesting aspect about the third-wave idea with reference to the post-industrial information society is linking it to the end of the Cold War and to developments since then. However, if we put the technological wizardry of the Internet and digitalised global communications aside for a moment, we need also to consider the impact of the content of these media on their audiences. What kind of audiences are we talking about in the third-wave societies, for we are no longer able to talk about one, homogeneous audience all watching the same thing at the same time? One of Toffler's themes is 'demassification'—the sort of breakdown of traditional concepts that we have hitherto understood within an industrialised mass media production system to a relatively homogeneous national audience into niche markets using information as a commodity to be bought and sold. In a digitised multichannel universe, this is already occurring. We began to see this in the 1980s with the transfer of broadcasting to narrow-casting and we are again beginning to see—and these are all ideas prompted from Godfrey Hodgson's talk—the fragmentation of news as a reflection of that 'demassified' audience.

Just as this requires us to think on the eve of the next millennium what we mean by news, it also prompts us to rethink what we are going to mean by the phrase 'public opinion'. Public opinion has been dominated in terms of the way we think about it by the seminal writings of Walter Lippmann, but, whereas Lippmann used to talk about the 'the world outside and the pictures in our heads' being drawn for us by, amongst others, the mass media, we need to rethink this entire concept in a demassified information age. So it is not just that news is changing but that our traditional concept of public opinion itself is changing within the context of globalisation and demassification. I do not as yet see many new Walter Lippmanns emerging to help us through this considerable transformation but I do think it is a fundamental change. We have already seen in the last 5 years how many of our post-1945 international agreements and charters and documents that have framed the second half of our century have been undermined. For example the World Trade Organisation has transformed our perception of news and information as a fundamental human right into

a commodity that can be bought and sold within a global information infrastructure. We can argue, of course, particularly given our conference hosts the Reuters Foundation, that international news agencies in the nineteenth century were founded on the premise that news and information has always indeed been a commodity. It was always a niche market with niche audiences. Perhaps this is why, for example, the *Financial Times* has become the best newspaper in Britain for dealing with foreign affairs—because of the economic link, because information is becoming a commodity again in a demassified environment. Perhaps the real difference now is that technology allows those niche audiences to be less dependent on the profession of news journalism to mediate the doings of the few to the many—because the few can communicate to the few who can afford it.

The mass media will not go away. They will adapt and survive—but perhaps in slightly different forms with different roles. For example, the response to the arrival of electronic news gathering in the 1980s—a real change that has forced a lot of professionals and news disseminators to rethink their role—shows how they can do this. However, this was not without its wider consequences. The arrival of real-time television has compressed the time available to decision makers to make the right sort of balanced judgements based on consideration of all the facts. One can only speculate what would have happened during the Cuban missile crisis had President Kennedy been subjected to the pressures of modern journalism. Today, we can expect news as it happens and that is often alleged to put pressure on decision makers who in the past had more time to reflect, confirm and verify. It is often said that if real-time television and commercial satellites had been available in the early 1960s and CBS had, say, transmitted the news that Russian missiles had already landed in Cuba, who knows what would have happened if American public opinion had known about that? The American administration knew it but they could at that time still keep such potentially explosive information out of the public domain. As we saw from the Gulf War of 1991, politicians no longer enjoy such luxuries. The first indications of the Iraqi troop movements into Kuwait in August 1990 were picked up by a French newspaper who purchased the images of troop movements from a commercial satellite. So we now have a real-time, competitive, deregulated, globalised international news environment, on the one hand putting extra pressure on policy makers to make decisions at a speed that might not be in the best interests of the watching audience while, on the other, an audience who might find live television exciting but not necessarily accurate in its depiction of events.

What does that say for the future of global television news operating at niche levels of audience ‘participation’? This is why increasingly we see the laughable sight on prime-time news bulletins of an anchor saying ‘we now go live to our reporter in the field’ and ‘what is happening?’. And what is happening? Nothing! So the reporter summarises what has already happened and speculates on what might happen later. However, the satellite time has been booked and it is expensive so they have to go live. But what is the point? To ‘inform, educate and entertain’? Perhaps indeed what we are seeing is a fusion of all three traditional functions of the public service tradition merging into a single news—or perhaps magazine—bulletin. Live rolling news stations like CNN have 24 hours of broadcasting time to fill. That is a lot of time and so again perhaps we should not be surprised at the rise of journalistic speculation and the corresponding redefinition of what we have traditionally define as ‘news’. Except perhaps at times of crisis, with the Gulf War being the best example to date, people will rarely sit down and watch rolling news for hours on end. However, they are using such services—like

teletext services—to access the news when they, the members of the audience, want to access it rather than expecting it at certain key times of the day. When the recorded video cassette became widely available, people used it for ‘time shifting’. This is where the Internet and digital news services are likely to reach their eventual niche market. The media have always been flawed as documents of record. However, whereas in the past historians were at least subsequently able to consult newspapers in newspaper libraries or surviving films like newsreels in inaccessible or expensive radio or television archives, these new technologies present a fresh set of challenges. Internet web pages come and go; digital pay-per-view channels will multiply to such an extent that no one archive will be able to record everything. All this may present new and difficult choices for the traditional gatherers and reporters of news but it will almost certainly make the job of the future historian a lot harder than it has ever been before.

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