

Myths of the Global Information Village

by *Claude Moisy*

The question seems as old as the world: Does progress make humankind better? Applied to the field of international relations, the question of the day is whether global electronic connections make citizens more aware of world problems and more able to contribute to their solution.

We should not delude ourselves. The Internet is a fantastic tool that makes life easier for a lot of professionals. It is certainly great for global stocks and for global smut. But it represents in no way the miraculous advent of the much heralded "global village." For decades now, hazy-eyed apostles of the communications revolution have prophesied about the coming of a world without boundaries where everybody will know everything about everybody else. Since knowing is understanding, we were all going to share our worries and unite in alleviating them.

This dream world would of course be of particular interest to practitioners of international relations, whose craft would change in an environment where most citizens were generally aware of and concerned about foreign affairs. The universal flow of information, bringing people closer together, would necessarily make the conduct of foreign policy more open and more responsive to the desires of the common man.

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INFORMATION: MORE SUPPLY, LESS DEMAND

So much for the dream. A careful analysis of the current exchange of foreign news around the world reveals an inescapable paradox. The amazing increase in the capacity to produce and distribute news from distant lands has been met by an obvious decrease in its consumption. This is certainly true for the United States, but it appears that the same phenomenon exists, to some degree, in most developed societies.

On the supply side, an unending series of technical advances has transformed the production and distribution of news. Through the extensive use of computers and satellites, multiplexing **and** fiber optics, and digitalization and data compression, information providers can offer more news today-in text, sound, and pictures-than ever before. It can be done quickly and cheaply and delivered to more users. An irresistible policy of telecommunications deregulation keeps accelerating the process by doing away with inefficient state monopolies.

This is, alas, no reason to fall for the big claim of the self-styled "global television networks" that they can broadcast instantly *to* everywhere the *news from* everywhere. In fact, the largest global television network, CNN International, retains only 35 foreign correspondents in 23 foreign bureaus, compared with the nearly 500 correspondents and 100 **bureaus supported** by each of the **major wire** services-the Associated Press (AP), Reuters, and Agence France-Presse (AFP) (see table on following page). Nor should one believe that all humankind is about to share knowledge through a "global network" of communication. That capability does not exist any more

than does the global village, and it probably never will. CNN International reaches only 3 per cent of the world's population, four-fifths of whom do not even have access to a television set. The number of people with access to the World Wide Web through their individual computers may grow exponentially, but it is certain to remain for a long time only a fraction of the 6 billion human beings who will inhabit the planet at the turn of the century.

Vast realms of our world either cannot or will not be covered by the news collectors because of the high costs involved in news gathering and because many repressive regimes will not let them in. There are large areas, particularly in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, where news within countries is severely controlled, and news from the outside hardly penetrates at all. Even a well-informed citizen

most 40 years old now-part of the history of communications technology. Most people lose sight of the scope of this phenomenon. From 1960 to 1995, the total circulation of American daily newspapers remained stagnant at around 59 million copies, while the population of the United States grew from 180 million to 260 million inhabitants. That translates into a one-third drop in per capita readership. This attrition is likely to accelerate since the rate of newspaper readership is twice as weak among those under 30 as among those over 65.

As far as news content is concerned, the shift from the printed word to the moving picture has turned out to be much more than a change of medium. We all know that television has progressively induced a 'radical change in our way of reacting to events. Politicians and diplomats have learned quickly

RELATIVE DIMENSION OF THE THREE GLOBAL NEWS WIRES AND CNN (1997)				
	AP	Reuters	AFP	CNN
Employees	3,420	15,500	3,100	3,500
Total bureaus	237	161	182	31
Foreign bureaus	93	139	176	23
Total journalists	1,312	1,960	1,100	156
Journalists abroad	520	1,040	1,040	50

Source: Annual Reports and other company documents

in an open country like the United States is largely unaware of living conditions in many other countries. The fact is that, contrary to the myth of global communication, the world is not fully wired, and our knowledge of it is spotty at best.

Is this situation likely to change? The public's capacity to pay attention to the outside world is normally enhanced by changes in the techniques of mass communication. But other factors have also come into play some political, some social, and some psychological. And, for the time being, they all seem to contribute to a decrease in the demand for foreign news.

FEELING VERSUS THINKING: TV OR PRINT?

The decline of the print media and the simultaneous ascendancy of television as the masses' favorite source of information is al-

that television is an emotional medium and that popular sentiment whipped up by television images can be an inescapable element of foreign policy. After Vietnam, military interventions abroad became highly vulnerable to the American public's low tolerance for casualties in foreign lands. A bloody terrorist attack on a U.S. troop cantonment in Lebanon proved this vulnerability in 1983, and President George Bush may have stopped short of total victory in Iraq in 1991 because he feared that the public would tire of the Persian Gulf war if it dragged on much longer.

Decisions taken vis-a-vis the U.S. intervention in Somalia provide the clearest example to date of the impact on policy of popular reactions to television pictures. The unbearable images of starving infants suckling at the empty breasts of their dying mothers quickly built a popular consensus for the dispatch of U.S. forces to "restore hope" in a desperate

country But a few months later, the equally unbearable spectacle of the twisted and bloodied body of a dead soldier being dragged through the dust of a Mogadishu street by a frenzied mob precipitated the withdrawal of the American troops. The unwritten law that U.S. military interventions abroad must now be swift and bloodless, at least for the **GIs**, is in part the result of the predominance of the television news show as a means of conveying information.

THE END OF USER-FRIENDLY MANICHAËISM

The end of the Cold War was a turning point in the consumption of foreign news in the United States. Both the media and the public

the public's attitude toward the outside world. Now a new trend is clear. Following an exceptional surge in 1990 and **1991**, due to America's leading role in the Gulf War more than to the breakup of the Soviet Union, the number and length of foreign topics in the evening news have declined far below Cold War levels. As a percentage of all topics covered between 1970 and 1995, the share of foreign stories fell from 35 per cent to 23 per cent, and the average length of those stories dropped from 1.7 minutes to 1.2 minutes. Worse, while the networks devoted on average more than **40** per cent of total news time to foreign items in the **1970s**, that share had been cut to 13.5 per cent of news time by 1995. (See table below.)

Whatever their other failings, the three oldest American television networks-ABC, CBS,

CONTINUING DECLINE OF FOREIGN NEWS ON NETWORK TELEVISION				
	1970s	1990-91	1993	1995
Per cent of foreign stories	35	41	24	23
Per cent of time	45	n/a	20	13.5
Average length of foreign story (min.)	1.7	2.2	1.6	1.2

Source: Pippa Norris, Television News index from the Vanderbilt Archive, author.

could **comprehend** the **bipolar**, Cold War world. There was the good side--the American., **side—which** was dedicated to freedom, **democracy**, and wealth creation, and it was threatened by the bad **side—the Soviet side—**which thrived on oppression and deprivation. Anybody who befriended the communists was bad, and anybody who opposed the **communists was good. Virtually** all world events had to fit that frame of reference to be of interest, to the American public. The disappearance of the Soviet Union brought that Manichean framework to: an end. As the **threat** of a **nuclear** strike faded, so too did the outside world in the American **consciousness**.

Scholars and professional organizations **have studied** the effect that the end of the Cold War has had on network television. **Since network news** shows are by far the main source of foreign news for the American people, they can be regarded as a good gauge of

and NBC-are at least retaining traces of their common tradition of international journalism. A fourth network, CNN, is **struggling** to make live global coverage its trademark The legacy of the Cronkites and the Chancellors of old encourages a semblance of fidelity But the trend in television consumption is far less comforting. Among the enormous offerings of cable and satellite television, news programs in general-and foreign news in **particular—**are disappearing in a flood of entertainment and niche-oriented channels.

THE FOUNTAIN AND THE HORSE

It is fashionable among journalists to blame commercial television for the diminishing status of foreign news on the screen. But that is only partially true. The **most** internationally oriented of the print media-a handful of quality metropolitan **dailies—have them-**

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selves been led to curtail their foreign coverage in recent years, and their executive editors excuse themselves by pointing to a reduced demand on the part of their readers. In the mid-1990s, when skyrocketing prices for newsprint and a weakened advertising market forced cost-control measures on most newspapers, the foreign news departments were nearly always the first to feel the pinch. Editors meekly recalled *New York Times* publisher A. H. Sulzberger's cute formula: "Along with responsible newspapers we must have responsible readers," because "the fountain serves no useful purpose if the horse refuses to drink."

The Times-Mirror Center for the People & the Press has been measuring the declining interest of the American public in foreign news for years now. Its surveys show that the only international events that still meet with a relatively high level of attention are those in which American forces or major American economic interests are involved. Without speaking of isolationism, it is obvious that the end of the Cold War has turned Americans inward. Surveys conducted every four years by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations show that the percentage of respondents who perceive "foreign policy problems" to be a high U.S. government priority has dropped from almost 26 per cent in 1986 to 11.5 per cent in 1994. "Protecting the jobs of American workers" now tops "protecting weaker nations against foreign aggression" as a goal of foreign policy by 83 per cent to 24 per cent. Foreign policy issues were widely seen to be irrelevant in the 1996 presidential campaign.

Americans also seem to be feeling a weariness toward a world that is increasingly dif-

ficult to decipher. Twenty years ago it was easy to sympathize with peoples struggling to free themselves from dictatorial regimes, particularly if those regimes were communist. Today an endless litany of catastrophes and desperate situations in faraway countries, many of which seem to defy rational explanation, is all the more taxing on the Western world's compassion. Whatever their government's position, people find it difficult to feel any sense of responsibility toward the starving refugees caught between fighting groups in the jungles of Zaire while the leader of that country basks in the comfort of a palatial home on the French Riviera. Similarly indifference marks the West's response toward events in Albania, where insurgents reject their government and the opposition alike and appear to be playing into the hands of criminal Mafias.

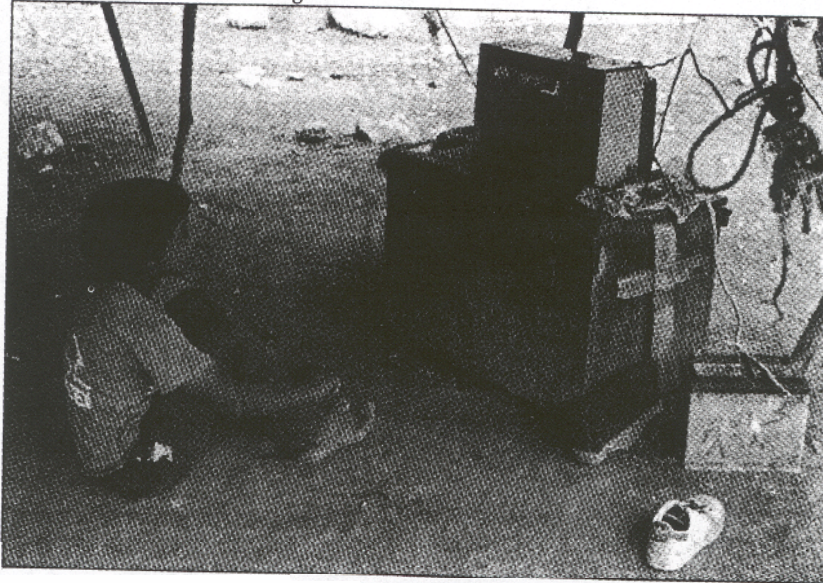
The globalization of the world economy is reinforcing this tendency to turn inward. An international marketplace where jobs go to the cheapest laborers has replaced nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers as the leading popular nightmare. This fear is especially strong in many developed countries outside the United States where high levels of unemployment threaten national cohesion.

In the United States, as in many other countries, the news horizon is tending to draw closer—from the international to the national and from the national to the local. This is perhaps one reason for the growing acceptance in American news organizations of the "public" journalism concept, which is not much more than the rediscovery of the local community by professionals who had hitherto taken pride in covering wider horizons. There would be a certain irony in seeing our world turn local just as it was about to become global.

INTERACTIVITY AND VIRTUALITY

The paradox of having more information to offer and less demand is nowhere more obvious than on the developing electronic network. In my view, two of its main characteristics—interactivity and **virtuality**—can have strongly negative effects on an individual's knowledge of and concern for the rest of the world. Radio talk shows, the first and crudest form of interactive communication, are not any worse than the Internet's so-called "news groups," where serious views on the news are seldom exchanged. Such activities generally

Television in the Global Village



AP/Wide World Photos

cater to the primal yearning to be heard and to reinforce one's biases by sharing them with like-minded folks. They are rarely credited with opening anyone's mind and tend to promote simplistic answers to complex issues. The Internet has become the haven for a myriad of one-issue chapels estranged from the rest of the world.

Online customized newspapers are another novelty that does not hold much promise for the circulation of international news and the building of a global village. In the prevailing climate of declining attentiveness to the outside world, there is no reason to believe that their electronic readers will select more foreign news for their self-made journals than they have been reading in the printed versions. To a certain extent, the traditional radio, television, newspaper, or magazine force-feeds its more-or-less captive audience with an information menu that has been prepared by professional journalists according to their own sense of relevance. In the new interactive forms of information acquisition, the final judgment on the news value of events is instead made by the individual consumer. Since an automatic tally can be kept of what the electronic consumer selects from the news menu, publishers will be ever more inclined to allocate their editorial resources according to the customers' demands. And the foreign news budget is usually the first to lose.

Virtuality-the ability to create a fictitious world using one's computer and to conceal one's identity in dealings with others-is a

more diffuse danger against which many commentators have already warned. The recreational function of the computer is usually what most attracts young people to it, and they soon relish the ease with which they can escape into endless galactic wargames. Psychosociologists have conflicting opinions on the influence that this activity may have on children's intellectual formation. But, in the long run, the too frequent immersion into fabricated worlds of make-believe is bound to alienate cybemauts from the all too real world around us.

BOTTOM-UP OR TOP-DOWN DIPLOMACY?

Does it really matter for the United States's foreign relations if the mass media and the general public become less interested in international affairs? We assume that, in a true democracy, the people have a say in how their country's relations with the rest of the world are conducted and that an uninformed public is more likely to pressure its leaders into **mak-**

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ing inappropriate decisions. But are these proper assumptions?

The "establishment" approach envisions only a small group of specialized journalists, academic researchers, and educated readers taking part in the foreign policy debate with politicians and high officials. In the United States it can be argued that the attentive public for international affairs does not exceed 4 or 5 million people, which happens to coincide with the circulation of the four or five most internationally oriented daily newspapers and with the maximum audience of PBS's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. **Though an élitist** concept, the "establishment" approach has always had some validity and is not likely to be overturned by the new information technologies.

That reality does not necessarily discredit Alexis de Tocqueville's perception that public opinion is the "mistress of the world." As the experiences in Lebanon and Somalia indicate, wide swings in public opinion have led the U.S. government into momentous foreign policy decisions. Other governments may be equally vulnerable to the sway of public opinion.

The elitist and populist views of the foreign policy process are not mutually exclusive, and neither one is threatened with extinction in the Information Age. The interface between public opinion and the management of international relations will probably continue to happen at two levels, as it has for some time now. On the one hand, the day-to-day conduct of most of a country's international relations will remain the preserve of a small, informed establishment with the tacit consent of a relatively indifferent public. On the other hand, circumstances will arise in which the public at large stirs and makes itself heard on foreign policy matters out of a perception, right or wrong, that the very *raison d'être* of the nation is at stake. In these cases the public will not necessarily react on the basis of knowledge and pertinent information but

more likely on the basis of collective emotions aroused by the mass media.

Whether the decisions made at either the elite or the popular level will be wise is another story

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

There is a large body of work that addresses the media's impact on foreign affairs, the classic text being Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (New York: Penguin, 1922). More recently Johanna Neuman's *Lights, Camera, War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) analyzes the effect that television news has on foreign policy.

For an insightful analysis of the progress being made toward global television, read Richard Parker's *Mixed Signals: The Prospects for Global Television News* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1995). Pippa Norris's *The Restless Searchlight: Network News Framing of the Post Cold War World*, (Cambridge, Mass.: John F. Kennedy School of Government, February 1995) offers a look at the effect that the end of the Cold War had on television foreign news content. And Lawrence Grossman's *Electronic Republic* (New York: Viking 1995) explores the impact of electronic media on the public policy debate.

The best sources revealing the public's interest in foreign news are periodic surveys released by the Pew Center for the People & the Press in Washington, D.C.

For contrary views on the wired man and the global village, a good starting point is Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

To obtain a copy of Claude Moisy's original report, *The Foreign News Flow in the Information Age* (Discussion Paper D-23, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University November 1996), write to the Center or call (617) 495-8269.