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On-line news and the changing national audience: A cross-national perspective

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The premise of this conference is that the Internet has had a profound effect on culture and society, by making possible new relationships among people and places while disrupting old ones. This Internet-based world, as a technological reality, corresponds to social changes captured by the idea of globalization. Facilitated by new media, globalization brings greater trans-national connectedness, with intersecting networks of economic, political, and cultural activity, referred to by David Held (2004) as “overlapping communities of fate” (p. x). Social issues can no longer be dealt with in isolation within national borders. More cosmopolitan outlooks mean conceptualizing moral issues of human rights without regard for one's country of residence. Actions of nation-states have always impinged on each other as they have made war on and colonized each other or banded together in more mutually beneficial ways. But the acceleration of global interconnectedness means that activities in one national context are now much more tied to effects in others, and indeed issues such as environmentalism and human rights often connect globally without passing through a national filter.

News of those activities and issues, however, has traditionally aligned with national frames of reference, produced for citizens of a particular country by professionals within that same country. But this relationship is changing. As a carrier of images about the world, news and information media--especially in the online environment--are key global players and increasingly now facilitate the disengagement of journalism from its national context. This, in turn, means recasting many of the ways we think about journalism and its role in the public sphere, that largely mediated space where citizens come together in discourse to create public opinion and political meaning. Foreign news, for example, traditionally has been defined with respect to the national reference; news from somewhere else, some other nation. “Foreign,” however, is no longer a meaningful concept within the global, and “local” and “national” now seem arbitrary given the issues that transcend those spaces. Arabs in the U.S. subscribe to satellite television,

Link TV reaching 23 million homes, through which they can tune to programs on Al-Jazeera that analyze U.S. political candidates positions on the Middle East issues. These Arab-Americans seek “local” news about the U.S. election filtered through a “global” Middle East prism (Horan, 2004). Al-Jazeera's website provides a similar function online. Press critics have raised concerns in recent years that the major U.S. media have reduced their commitment significantly to covering foreign news. But this doesn't mean that the amount of foreign news available to U.S. citizens has been cut--at least those citizens with Internet access have more news available than ever before.

Given our bi-national focus on the French and American context, we will consider some issues relating to the Internet and news particularly with relevance to the changing global news audience. We would like to set out some important research questions and consider how we might best pursue them. We will briefly examine the shape of on-line journalism and how it has broadened the definitions of journalism and contributed to the formation of a global news arena. To understand this global shift it is first helpful to understand something about the differences in how journalism functions in both national settings. From there it is possible to consider how these differences may change when the public spheres of these distinct cultures are projected into cyberspace. We will consider the respective developments in on-line journalism in both France and the U.S. We map out some empirical questions as to how likely on-line practices will converge or remain distinct as they respond to their respective historical roots? In recent years the relations between the two countries have been strained following policy differences over the “war on terror” and a unilateralist American foreign strategy. To the extent that journalism reinforces xenophobic and chauvinistic tendencies in national cultures it works against a more multi-lateral and cosmopolitan basis for international relations. This concern draws our attention to the potential for the Internet to work against these tendencies.

Global journalism

A more globalized public naturally seeks perspectives beyond the specific locality and nation, and technology allows it to do so. The Internet has allowed many new kinds of communication, but it particularly has had important implications for journalism, both in how it is produced and consumed. The migration of news and information to an on-line platform means that location is no longer a meaningful impediment to reaching an audience, as long as there is access to a computer and the necessary connection. This new Internet communication would not concern us if it only made faster and more convenient traditional social interactions and information seeking. Much of the same news can be found in the printed edition of the New York Times as in its on-line version. But on-line journalism has disrupted old patterns of reading, opened up new audiences for news, and changed the relationship between audiences and news providers. With regard to political coverage, for example, on-line journalism was said to have come of age during the scandal involving President Clinton, Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky, when the report by the special investigator Kenneth Starr was released first on the Internet and made available directly to the public. Some early reports in the scandal were revealed not by the traditional media but by newcomers such as the Drudge Report, a gossip-oriented website not bound by conventional professional guidelines. The Internet has increased the speed, reach, and comprehensiveness of journalism and lowered the cost of entry to anyone seeking to join the on-line community.

In breaking down geographic limitations on access to information, the Internet and the world-wide web-based journalism and other communication it makes possible undermine the historic relationship between the press system and the national community. As Morris and Waisbord (2001) observe:

...transnational forms of political participation in a global public sphere together with growing numbers of diasporas, cyber-communities, and other cultural groupings that cut across state boundaries invite the reevaluation of national-based models of citizenship. The availability of transnational media may facilitate the creation of transnational collective identities. Electronic mail groups and global news networks provide the communication backbone for global political activities.

This disruption and reconstruction within the information environment is highlighted for issues that pertain specifically to a nation's position in the international community. U.S. audiences, for example, did not need to confine themselves to the post-9/11 tribal patriotism of the national media, particularly the hyper-patriotic television networks, for news about the Iraq War. They could track European news sites more closely for alternative points of view, exercising their need for information on a global scale (Croad, 2003). Bill Dutton of the Oxford Internet Institute, for example, says that "The most obvious thing that the web provides is access to a greater diversity of viewpoints and a more international viewpoint." Adam Porter, of the British on-line current affairs quarterly, YearZero, says,

It's really patronizing to assume, as the mainstream media often does that ordinary people don't talk about Iraq, asylum or economics down at the pub. You can go all around the world and find similar things and it's the web that's bringing them together.
(MediaGuardian 2003)

Thus, we can see that the on-line environment "deterritorializes" news, such that the user, creator, and news subject need no longer share the same national frame of reference. This in many ways creates a freer information environment, allowing link-ups of world publics around issues, with resulting benefits for political life. As Anthony Giddens (2000) reports, the "intrinsically open framework of globalization" has a natural relationship with democracy, leading many to attach great hopes to the Internet's potential in advancing more engaged and active citizenship around the world. The potential freedom of the Internet is vital to journalism, as seen in the ongoing professional attempts to prevent filtering or other oppression. The Reporters Without Borders, an advocacy group for journalists advancing press freedom, works to protest any such restrictions. The web has allowed a new tier of politically engaged media to develop, such as Indymedia.org. This collective of independent media organizations and journalists has provided a critique of war coverage in the mainstream press, and worked to reframe issues away from military strength to diplomatic relationships and, as it reports, promote "global citizenship." The Internet levels the playing field among nations, with the weaker ones now able to get their position out to a wide audience. Palestinians, for example, can provide services such as the Palestine Monitor and Palestine Chronicle in English, getting their perspectives available to a wider global audience--something not possible with newspapers or television. So, information globalization means that citizens have access to news, events and commentary in a way never possible before, and not solely from within their own national perspective. Conceptually, it is possible to see that recasting civil society and the public sphere

globally makes it less susceptible to control and co-optation by a single nation-state.

The Internet is the most important technology supporting the globalization of information and helping construct what we may call the global news arena. This arena does not mean that the entire world is watching or reading the same thing at the same time, but it is held together in time and space through communication. This simultaneity of awareness of world events, the accelerated pace of their revelation, and a reconfigured spatial reach allows citizens to engage with each other across traditional borders. The global audience is not just bigger than the national or regional audience--it is more compressed as it reaches greater synchronized awareness of itself. Neither is global news an homogenized product as some have feared, but it is a journalistic practice and community with greater reflexivity, where the local and global are brought into greater connection with each other. Officials and media in traditionally closed societies, for example, must assume that their audiences have access to news from elsewhere and must adapt accordingly. Erroneous news reports can be rapidly challenged, not only by other media but by the wired audience, which can engage such reports through on-line communities--an extended communication infrastructure that weaves the global new arena more tightly together. The Internet has enabled more citizens to perform journalistic roles, with web loggers, for example, claiming credit for helping disclose irregularities in reporting by CBS News during the fall 2004 election campaign about documents concerning the President's military service. Earlier "bloggers" had promoted scandalous remarks by Senator Trent Lott about the segregated South, comments that the traditional media had not until then deemed newsworthy. Iraqi bloggers from Baghdad, beginning with Salem Pax and joined by others, continue to provide independent reports of daily life in a war zone.

The post-election voting analysis on the Internet has recently shown how effective this interconnected cyber-journalism can be in arriving quickly at consensual understanding. Early rumors raised the possibility of widespread voter fraud, but in a combination of cross-referencing email, web sites and weblogs, others including academic experts were able to repudiate some earlier analyses with their own (Zeller, 2004, p. 1). The rapid interactivity and transparency of their on-line conversation made such a development possible. With email, newsgroups, and blogs, stories from news organizations can be copied, distributed, annotated, and engaged, in ways that extends their life and impact far beyond initial publication, further interconnecting the journalistic field.

Ultimately, the web changes the location of "authority" in the journalistic world. Previously, credibility was closely guarded and protected by news institutions, which have seen their public trust steadily decline over the years. The professional status of the journalists, and "insider" position, gave them a special status with their audience. Now, knowledge and authority are embedded in the web of information made possible by the Internet. It is in the cross-referencing, pooled consensual understandings, in the interactive "conversation" that the authority resides, ironically in large part by connecting and referencing the news reports produced by traditional journalists.

Mapping the on-line news world

Before considering specific national experiences, it is useful to map out the on-line world as it

compares to the traditional mass media and review how on-line news has changed the practice of journalism. Here we are trying to organize the world of journalism, and so restrict ourselves to identifying those media that contribute to the public sphere. The lines inevitably become blurred but we can exclude those expressions deemed primarily artistic and communications that are mainly personal, such as email. Mapping the on-line world obviously means drawing a distinction between it and the pre-internet “off-line” world. Off-line refers to printed media; on-line is digital, computer-based. Off-line can be print, video, or audio carried through conventional channels. Within these zones lies the more difficult distinction.

Professional/public, traditional/non-traditional

The important distinction refers to the difference between professional (traditional) media organizations and the public media, those more informal, citizen-based, non-traditional forms. This dimension captures a combination of features including the level of professional “authority” and the level of economic resources media organizations or entities it commands. The professional, traditional media draw their institutional authority and value from their casting of it within the norms of journalism. That usually means professional paid staff, who are recognized officially for access to events as “the press.” These staff are usually experienced in the journalistic craft and many have formal training. Subscriber and advertising support provide traditional media with the means to widely distribute their product. Given the adherence to professional norms, traditional media cultivate an institutional image and reputation, and at least in the U.S. they clearly delineate news and opinion. The mainstream press all fall within this category. Even those journals of opinion such as *The Nation* would be classified as “professional.” They still clearly identify their ideological position but engage with other journalists on a similar professional footing. The public-based citizen media originate from citizen and public interest groups seeking to express an idea or position within the public discourse. The product may be of professional quality, but they as producers do not require adherence to a professional journalistic code as a requirement for participation. By definition, these public non-professional media, command less commercial viability and may be based on a non-profit, subsidy, or no-revenue business model. They only require a motivated individual or group willing to speak to a public. Traditionally, these have included smaller-scale commercially subversive publications like *Adbusters*, or other media under more close control by the individual creator, such as zines, cartoons, and self or small published books. The Internet has opened up much more space for the non-traditional citizen-based category. The on-line universe also opens up a wide array of opportunities for non-professionals who now have the means to communicate with an audience. Even within this professional/public distinction, there are blurring boundaries. Ohmynews is a Korean on-line newspaper with professional staff but featuring as much as 80 percent of its content from “citizen reporters,” who provide news for a minimal fee (Japan media review, 10/1/04).

Figure 1: Mapping on-line journalism



<i>Online</i>	NYTimes.com, CNN.com, LA Times.com, Lemonde.fr	Ohmynews, Google News	Indymedia, weblogs, chain emails, newsgroups
<i>Offline</i>	New York Times, CNN, BBC, Le Monde		Adbusters, zines, cartoons, self-published books

Traditional on-line

Professional, “traditional” media, whether radio, television, newspapers, or magazines, can and have all gone on-line when digitized and made available anywhere in the world via the Internet. Thus, traditional media, including the major news organizations, have gone on-line with their products as another means of distribution and have similar characteristics to their off-line counterparts. There are more “walls” around content, with visitors often required to register and/or pay for the service and with less linking off-site. The professional organization exercises greater control over on-line content, with less interactivity and less reader-submitted content. As of last summer, ratings showed that Internet use for news and information is still dominated by the traditional, “professional” media. The top 10 sites included CNN, Yahoo News, MSNBC, AOL News, Gannett, NYTimes.com, Internet Broadcasting Systems, Inc., Knight Ridder Digital, Tribune Newspapers, and USA Today.com. (Editor & Publisher, 2004). The world of blogs and other “non-professional” media is growing quickly, however, and these sites make extensive use of the professional media.

Public, non-traditional on-line

On-line versions of public media exhibit similar characteristics to their off-line counterparts. They have a higher rate of interactivity and more reader-submitted content. “Higher interactivity” suggests more synchronous communication, such as with a section for comments following each piece of writing, allowing the audience to correspond in close to real time with the content producer or with each other. In less interactive “professional” media, other than the occasional online interview/chat form where audience members can question journalists, the reader can at best email the journalist. But with this communication not being public the chances of getting a response are lessened. It also means more extensive interaction between different websites: sites call and respond to each other directly by linking. Professional media don't have the kinds of online conversations with each other that characterize the more public citizen-based sites. Examples of such media include personal websites, non-governmental organization (NGO) websites, chain emails, Usenet discussion groups, and message boards. The great advantage of the Internet has been to lower the cost of entry for participants in this area of communication.

The on-line platform opens up more denationalized space, even for traditional media. For example, The Guardian Unlimited is the most successful newspaper site in the U.K., topped only by the BBC online for online news in Britain. More than 2 million of its 7.5 million unique

visitors per month are from outside the U.K, especially the U.S. Guardian journalists willingly provide exclusive online content to the site, which generates enormous response from the countries from which they report (Bell, 2004).

The deterritorialization of news, the porosity of connecting beyond national borders is higher with the public online media, with their greater reader participation, allowing more reader submitted content and more interactivity, which allows for a higher possibility of links to other sources from other countries. Within national discourses, these media can exhibit a more polarized alignment. There is more niche-news and less broadcasting (more narrowcasting), with a tendency for “link inbreeding” that creates an echo-chamber effect. Amazon’s on-line book purchasers generate recommendations that point to books along similar lines, web sites link to sources that support the site's argument, and blogrolls (list of permanent links to other websites/weblogs on homepage of a weblog) typically follow a conservative/liberal litmus test with rare mixing. But these specific dimensions need not be strictly national.

The online environment makes overlap between professional and citizen-based, traditional and nontraditional sources easier. Overlapping off-line is a manual activity and more audience-driven, whether at bookstores, newsstands, or interpersonal information seeking. Online overlap is more often an automated media-driven process through links, recommendations, blogrolls that will send readers to variety of sources based on the interests they express. Offline, the audience needs to pull from other sources, while online, the audience is pushed to them. A number of Internet news sites are important, and among the most frequently visited, expressly because they enable and promote this online overlapping.

Aggregators on the web organize news and information sites into news portals, such as Google News, Yahoo News, and AOL News (and most recently Microsoft's MSN Newsbot). These provide an important service by interweaving diverse sources of information. In the case of GoogleNews, now the 11th most popular site for news, a formula is used to group and prioritize sites based on relevance and other criteria. A menu of news stories is automatically generated several times an hour and displayed in their newspaper-like categories: top stories, business, sports, etc. According to a designer of the Google News web site, the computer algorithm strives for inclusion, with both big and small organizations represented in the selection process (OJR, 2004). These portals do not confine themselves to the national media, and, while nothing prevented off-line media from making reference to extra-national media these were not practically available as a link on the Internet now makes them. One of the crucial pressures Google News provides is to open up news content on the web. News providers, which previously might have preferred walling off their content, now are taking steps to enhance their currency by making their stories available to news summaries and blogs that point to it. So, in the case of Google News and Ohmynews, the boundary blurs between the professional and citizen media zones.

Cross-national differences

The discussion above has focused on how the global has worked to reconfigure the national. With respect to journalism, however, much of the national is still alive and well and must be understood within its own historical and geographical settings. Issues of language, government,

and norms still divide the world's citizens along national lines. National frames of reference still dictate how much of the news is produced and consumed. A number of scholars have been skeptical as to the prospect of a global public sphere and corresponding media. Curran (2002), for example, finds still underdeveloped the global communication system necessary to support a more global governance. For him national journalism is still the prism that filters news of global events, and restricts and distorts their portrayals in the same way it does more localized occurrences. In spite of the great efforts to encourage a more pan-European public sphere, Schlesinger (2000) is among those who doubt that a meaningful trans-national news practice is possible. The limited cross-national work in political communication has led to the same conclusion. Hallin and Mancini (1992), for example, observed in coverage of international summits how rooted journalists were in their respective professional and national cultures. These observations, however, still pertain mainly to traditional professional media.

Examining the national context suggests that journalists, as an interpretive community, are caught between the vertical, nationalistic perspective, and a more horizontal, cosmopolitan view. This fault line is seen in the difficulty American journalists have had in balancing their patriotic view with a more global perspective. The same phenomenon is present in France. In a recent review of internal crisis at *Le Monde*, critics identify the editors with a view of cosmopolitan Europeanism and free marketry that sought to undermine French nationalism. Bernard-Henri Levy' has argued that the attack on the newspaper was "a cross-partisan attempt to return to a renewed ideologies française, an ugly, reflexive, and frightened nationalism..." (Gopnik, 2004, p. 68).

Cross-national perspective

So, even if we assume that forces of globalization have rendered the nation-state less relevant, we can gain perspective on these processes by taking a cross-national approach. Before we can understand how the global changes the national, we must first more clearly understand the nature of the national. Comparing two national contexts, helps avoid naturalizing and taking for granted those patterns that are peculiar to one set of historical and geographical circumstances. Most research into journalism and the forces shaping it have come from the U.S. and the U.K., so many of the generalizations drawn from this sociology of news have been drawn from a limited range of political cultures. This Anglo-Saxon emphasis leaves much room for examining other contexts. Particularly, given the tight relationship of journalism with the national public sphere, it makes sense to examine variations of these spheres. Nevertheless, only a few cross-national studies of American and French journalism have been conducted (e.g., Brossard, Shanahan, & McComas, 2004). Among the few, Benson (2001) has examined how the journalistic field differs cross-nationally between the U.S. and France helping understand differences not automatically determined by commercial pressures. Of course, issues of language access and limited cultural exchanges make comparisons for English-speaking scholars more challenging. Within communication social science and university-based journalism research, the French are under-represented compared to the Germans, Asians, and British. Thus, collaborative ties among scholars have been slower to develop. The theme of this conference leads us to consider the U.S. and France, as two major Western developed world powers with well-established media and journalistic systems that differ with respect to language, culture, and national policy. They also differ, however, in state control and in level of commercialization.

US French journalism

The French have not been as concerned as Americans with involvement of the government in media operations. As Benson (2002) outlines, the French media system is more state controlled and dependent, with government subsidies both direct (in the interest of “press pluralism”) and indirect (reducing some expenses, such as postage rates). The French government licenses journalists and publications, something never countenanced in the U.S. with its First Amendment enshrining freedom of the press. Press law is generally more liberal in the U.S., with greater protections for journalists in areas such as defamation and criticism of officials. Agence-France Presse, the oldest news service and world's third largest, operates independently but is subsidized by the French government as its largest client and government representatives sit on its board of directors. The governments' role, however, does not prevent the French press from being critical of government and covering political scandal (if only perhaps to demonstrate their independence).

The French system is less commercialized than the U.S. system, judging from lower advertising support and less extensive publicly traded stock ownership in the French case. The French press has been called “paternalistic,” resisting the tendency to appeal to marketing considerations (Thogmartin, 1998). Even though less commercialized, the major newspapers are more centralized in the crucial Paris market and more directly competitive economically than their nationally distributed American counterparts (Benson, 2002).

French journalism has a conflicted relationship with American journalism. French “political/literary” press tradition differs from the American “informational” model (Benson, 2004). The New York Times corollary, *Le Monde*, combines the roles of a “newspaper of record” and a journal of opinion (calling itself a journal of “reference”) and doesn't insist on their clear delineation as is the case in American journalism (e.g., Thogmartin, 1998). The American model adheres to a strict separation of fact and opinion. With roots in the Progressive tradition, American journalism values facts and investigative reporting enshrined in the values of the Pulitzer Prize. French journalism features much more opinion and interpretation, more engagement of different political views, more historical and political context (Benson & Hallin, 2004). Compared with American journalism, the French press, although not formally tied with political parties, is more politically engaged in a society more politically polarized with less elite consensus. The French press features a greater range of ideologies and does more to encourage public debate (Benson, 2004). Benson notes (2002) that within French journalism some have sought to Americanize its practices, toward a more “professionalized” fact-based and non-partisan style, not without public criticism--but national differences are still marked more by continuity than in convergence.

Generally speaking it's safe to say that the French have different relationship with the on-line environment than Americans. The technology has been slower to diffuse and computer adoption and usage rates are lower than in the U.S. Impressionistically, one observes that French colleagues are slower to respond to e-mail, a means of communication now second-nature to many Americans who demonstrate that they are constantly on-line by the speed of their replies. Not being constantly on-line indicates that French, and Europeans more generally, still value

face-to-face conversation--including over the morning newspaper at the corner cafe'.

France's online journalism has been slow to take off and is not as well developed as in the U.S. Economic cutbacks and lack of profitability have hurt the evolution of this journalistic form. Traditional French journalists originally were concerned that the Internet would lower standards, but this reluctance some argued in the online community was based more on resistance to change. So far on-line journalism is said to have little life of its own, and seen mainly as a means to attract readers to the print edition (Lassica, 2002).

Research questions

Taking Bourdieu's idea of the "field," defined as a "microcosm with its own laws" (p. 39) operating with taken for granted rules, means examining the social actors within that field and its historical circumstances. As Bourdieu argues, it means examining the national media field within the global media field (1998). So, a careful look at the state, economic, and cultural dimensions of the respective French and American fields helps understand the unique ways in which journalism has developed--and as an extension, the on-line media.

There are clear national differences between the U.S. and France, with the question being how much does the Internet contribute to flattening those differences and also allowing new forms of journalism to emerge within each national context. How does an emerging on-line journalism form itself based on pre-existing national models and cultural contexts, and to what extent does it conform to a world model where the American information/objective style is becoming the standard?

In considering the typology of traditional and online media, we would expect national differences in how online media build on their traditional counterparts, and the extent to which new forms of journalism are formed by the hybrid joining of professional and citizen-based communication. What, for example, is the level of national insularity online in the two national contexts? We would expect that the open nature of the Internet world inevitably leads to cross-national connections and a lessened national "walling" of the information arena. Similarly, as journalistic professional authority shifts onto a larger trans-national network, which incorporates both professional and citizen-based media, so will the identification of that community shift in a more globalized direction. Given the importance of trans-national understanding, the promise of this shift is that it will work against narrow nationalisms with their tribal patriotisms and toward a more cosmopolitan perspective by the world's news audiences. That is an issue that should concern us as scholars, and programs such as this one should help make it possible.

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