François Heinderyckx*

The Confines of News Universalism

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Abstract: News outlets remain predominantly segmented by national boundaries, despite the spectacular development of a range of technologies offering the potential to overcome many of the barriers to transnational news circulation. Likewise, national and local outlooks on the news are persistent even for matters of worldwide magnitude and interest. This article argues that the facts related to newsworthy events should be more systematically paired with the scientific knowledge that is required to describe them accurately. Because facts and scientific knowledge should transcend cultural, social and political differences, they could constitute the basis for a limited but fundamental core of news universalism supported by global news agencies and other international news sources.

Keywords: journalism, news media, news universalism, scientific knowledge, transnational news

Journalism and news outlets are established and operated to reach and meet the expectations of a specific audience. The people exposed to each outlet may or may not belong to the imagined target audience. Likewise, not everyone within that target audience will be reached. Nevertheless, news production and dissemination are managed so that the outlet will match with its target audience. The target audience of news outlets can vary in size, homogeneity, and geographical spread, and news media may range from the hyperlocal to the global.

Historically, technological innovation expanded the potential reach of news media: printing presses, roads, railroads, airplanes, telecommunications, satellites, then the internet incrementally expanded the potential range of distribution of news bulletins from the immediate surroundings to the entire planet. By the turn of the 21st century, news reporting was either produced in or converted into digital format, allowing instant distribution to anyone interested and enjoying access to the internet. The marginal cost of increasing the potential audience became minimal. Setting up a digital platform to distribute news reports may cost more if one needs to offer several linguistic versions or if a large number of users requires high-capacity infrastructure, but news availability to the entire world is in general

***Corresponding author: François Heinderyckx**, Université libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium, E-mail: Francois.Heinderyckx@ulb.be. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3710-6098>

easier and cheaper than ever. The development of telecommunication technologies led almost immediately to utopian visions of a world without borders where information, culture, and communication could flow unimpeded. Technology was the bedrock of an imagined “global village” (McLuhan, 1962), where communities were no longer confined by distance and, consistent with globalisation, the world would become not just one large market, but one community (which does not rule out divisions, conflicts, etc.).

Media determinism and technological determinism overall have since shown their limits. Most importantly, experience has revealed that the potential of a communication technology does not necessarily determine its actual deployment, let alone its adoption and its use. Transnational news media are no exception. In television, pioneers like CNN seem to lead the change using the full potential of newly deployed broadcasting satellites and setting up global operations for a worldwide audience. Yet CNN proves the potential for television news channels more than they prove the viability of global television channels. Its own operations are split by regions and a number of national or regional CNN channels have been set up in Japan, Turkey and Italy, among others. The Internet gives a new lease of life to circulation of news as it provides a better and convenient way for viewers to understand other cultural groups. It also helps to increase tolerance for alternatives as long as news media from around the world are easily accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.

1 Limits of Transnational News

The factors that hinder transnational news media are well known: language barrier, cultural distance, proximity-driven news value, a taste for a national or local perspective on the news, and domestication of news stories (even international ones). Attempts at creating transnational news media for a general audience, let alone developing a transnational public sphere, have largely failed, even in a region of limited scale such as Europe (Heinderyckx, 2015). The nation remains a major marker of community (Stevenson, 2000) and of media markets segmentation (Heinderyckx, 1998). News media do reach audiences in other countries, though this is when, essentially, the neighboring countries share the same language and quality media (Rauchfleisch, Vogler, & Eisenegger, 2020). Only a handful of news outlets that target some very specific groups of individuals who have formed a fairly globalised transnational elite community sharing the same language (English), similar interests (international trade, finance, business, and travel) have proved viable, even very profitable.

And yet stories on topics that are considered highly relevant for people worldwide will be best told from the perspective of specific communities. Even though “the global outlook may also be present – at least in embryonic form – in domestic news” (Berglez & Olausson, 2019, p. 4), journalists and their audience still prefer a national or local outlook; many topics would be better explained by resorting to a global outlook (Berglez, 2013, p. 82). International news agencies have consolidated into a small number of massive global operations, and specialise in “subjects whom sell in multiple markets” (Palmer, 2019, p. 244) even as national news agencies have flourished to provide newsrooms with some of the material to cater to their craving for a national outlook. With the possible exception of Reuters, all major international news agencies operate both globally and domestically, and exchange stories with national news agencies (Surm, 2019, p. 1862).

The persistence of national or local outlook in the news, even when reporting on events of worldwide magnitude and interest, should not be interpreted as an effort to achieve a state of equilibrium between local and global journalism. After all, stories can conceivably combine local and global perspectives, and they often do. Instead, we should further unpack the process of news reporting to seek elements that are more likely to transcend the barriers of social, political, and cultural diversity and constitute a core of universalism in the news.

2 Illusive Objectivity versus Overt Partisanship

News media outlets produce content that aims to enlighten their audience about current affairs within their supposed sphere of interest. That content can adopt a wide range of formats, and it may differ in category (e.g., political), type (e.g., soft news), or style and genre (e.g., literary). But news content is also typically split along a fundamental divide between facts and opinions, between news and values. This distinction only developed in the early 20th century when newspapers preferred refraining from expressing opinions to concentrate on reporting exclusively the facts. Objectivity then became a fundamental norm of journalism (Jordan, 2021; Schudson, 1978). The firewall between the reporting of facts and the venting of opinions became the praxis of professional journalism worldwide and most news outlets had dutifully provided clearly separated sections to allow audience to know unambiguously the nature of the content they are exposed to.

However enduring, this fundamental rift provides only a veil of illusive sheltering for objective journalism. By segregating the voicing of opinions and values, news media reinforce the implicit contract that news reporting is exempt from any personal, political, ideological or philosophical bias. Even though the claim of objectivity or neutrality was initially aimed at broadening the potential audience

by limiting the risk of antagonising any segment of the audience, many news outlets have built their success on an overtly partisan take on the news permeating gatekeeping and news selection as much as framing and writing.

Journalists around the world are found to share a number of traits of journalistic culture, including their self-perceived role as reporters and their adherence to codes of ethics (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2019, p. 286). Yet partisanship will take different forms and will be more or less overtly embraced in different parts of the world as a result of specific contexts of media economies, news media independence from political institutions and business interests, and newsroom cultures (Waisbord, 2007, p. 116). For example, in Latin America, a strong tradition of partisan journalism finds itself exploited by populist regimes to serve the regime. These forms of populism journalism refer “to a model of journalistic practice that is ostensibly identified with populist administrations and rejects the idea of professional journalism.” (Waisbord, 2013, p. 511).

Even within a single country, tradition and regulation regarding objectivity, balance and partisanship may vary from one type of media to another (Thomas, 2019). Historically, radio and television have been strictly regulated and constrained because they developed in a context of great concern for propaganda and potential manipulation of public opinion. Therefore, political bias, let alone outright partisanship has long been unsuitable for television and radio news, especially for publicly funded outlets (public service media). Some of the world’s best-known news brands are still fiercely proclaiming that their journalism is unbiased and driven only by the fundamentals of professional journalism (relevance, truth seeking, democratic control, etc.). The same is true in small media markets where a broad appeal to audiences of various ideological leanings is a matter of viability. Yet, paradoxically, news organisations with a robust image of neutrality and balance are most vulnerable to pressure by partisan agents who resort to accusing them, even in bad faith, of bias (Jordan, 2021).

3 News Universalism

The channels and the formats used to circulate the news look remarkably similar the world over: newspapers, glossy magazines, television and radio news bulletins, multimedia websites, smartphone apps, podcasts, etc. The Anglo American canons of journalistic norms have also, in principle, propagated to the newsrooms and the journalism schools across the world. And yet, news media content appears to cumulate multiple layers of idiosyncratic characteristics affecting news selection, narrative forms, partisanship, ethical norms, newsroom independence, etc.

Between the apparent similarities in formats, and the inextricable particularisms in content, is it possible to establish some footing for a portion of the news that would be universal; a framework that would not differ across social, political, and geographical contexts; a core of news universalism?

Although it is still useful to distinguish facts (and the journalistic account that they allow) from opinions (and the comments and discourse that convey them), unveiling a universal news substrate requires us to unpack news content further. In my recent work (Heinderyckx, 2021), I proposed to distinguish three aspirations of news content: reporting (the news proper), explaining (the interpretation of the news), and commenting (the expression of values and opinions). I contend that these three aspirations range from the most objective (reporting) to a mix of objective and subjective (explaining) to the most subjective (commenting). The reporting of the news being the most objective, it is also, if done rigorously, the least disputable (Figure 1).

Figure 1: News universalism in relation with reporting, explaining, and commenting (derived from Heinderyckx, 2021).

Within the reporting portions of journalism, we can further distinguish between the material facts and the knowledge (Heinderyckx, 2021). Materials facts can be defined as “assertions about the world open to independent validation” (Schudson, 1978). Although some of the most sensitive or disputed assertions might, in many cases, be very challenging or impossible to submit to independent validation, the fact that it could, in theory, be independently verified gives it a universal complexion. This is similar to falsifiability in science. Material facts are, by nature, dissociated from cultures, opinions, ideologies or context of reporting. The language used to describe those facts, because they inevitably convey some level of interpretation, might cause disagreements and controversies. But the facts themselves, the material reality of what happened, would qualify as universal and

could be shared with all newsrooms in the world. This, however, requires that a consensus is reached as to what happened. Any disputed detail, until it is firmly established beyond doubt, remains in the transitional realm of speculation. In a number of cases, it might remain there for extensive periods of time, if not indefinitely. Accidents are an interesting category of events in that respect. For major accidents, a few facts will be quickly and unambiguously established: time of the accident, number and identity of people involved, victims, etc. Consensus as to the causal chain that led to the accident will take longer as it will require extensive and thorough investigation. But unless the context leads to suspicions of a cover-up, once the conclusion of the investigation is known, the material facts of an accident will be accepted by journalists and their audience as established. The exact same facts will be available to all newsrooms. Whether they choose to report those facts and the manner in which they frame these facts will vary widely, but the material facts themselves should remain.

The reporting portion of the news is not just based on the account of facts and events. It is also anchored in reality by leaning on the extensive amount of knowledge that humankind has accumulated over the course of history. Modern science and the cumulative knowledge it produces are organised in ways that are structurally globalised, and therefore universal. With the exception of certain sensitive domains in the humanities or social sciences, scientific knowledge stems from successive cycles of consensus forming (often following disputed challenges) within various communities of scholars. Their tools and methods, their epistemic principles and their criteria for validation, are shared across national boundaries. Therefore, whenever the understanding, explanation and contextualisation of material facts require to be enlightened by science, the scientific knowledge that is added to the news mix will tell a similar story anywhere as the experts consulted by journalists share the same scientific consensus irrespective of where they operate. Therefore, scientific knowledge that is relevant to understanding specific events, their causes, their nature, their possible consequences, the risk they show and the action they require, would also qualify as being part and parcel of news universalism.

Assuming that material facts and the scientific knowledge that can provide a backdrop of relevant context come closest to news universalism, does not that bode well for new forms of transnational news media that would offer a mere combination of facts peppered with scientific knowledge where relevant? The business of circulating just the facts (or mostly) has long been the goal of international news agencies as they take on the role of providing news outlets and the public with their most accurate account of the material facts of significant events.

4 Scientific Knowledge as Universal Adjuvant to Facts

If scientific knowledge is required to even describe the facts accurately, before any attempt to interpret and comment on the events, then those elements of necessary knowledge should be circulated simultaneously by the same sources, using the same channels. Given that science is globalised and that, at least in natural and medical sciences, the same body of knowledge is valid and accepted as relevant around the world, there is no reason why the distribution of these much-needed snippets of science could not be centralised and globalised. International news agencies could develop a specific stream. They all have some kind of “science news” category, but what we need are targeted, popularised accounts of relevant scientific knowledge that would pair up with the news dispatches to supply a relevant and accessible inventory of concepts, theories, and precedents to help newsmakers tell the story in a compelling manner. This would require a strong bond between news agencies and academic circles, one that goes beyond maintaining an address book with contacts in different universities and research agencies. Learned societies, academies of science, and certain non-governmental organisations could play a role as brokers of scientific knowledge to anchor the news industry in reality and enlighten the public.

The two institutions most central to developing and guarding a shared understanding of reality, namely science and journalism, could team up in ways that would be mutually beneficial. News media would improve their accuracy and their potential to enlighten their audience. Science operators would contribute to bolstering science literacy which, in turn, would pre-empt ploys to discredit science while reinforcing public trust in science, scientists, scientific methods, scientific institutions, and the knowledge they produce and disseminate. By working more closely together, science and journalism could launch an auspicious initiative of news universalism with the potential to transcend cultural, social, and political differences in expanding and strengthening a common awareness of reality.

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