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What's Happened to Global News?

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Abstract: Scholarship on “global journalism” – to the extent that the phenomenon is explored empirically – is often based on the analysis of national media. This article considers, instead, how the global fares in global newsrooms, and what has happened to global news since the early years of the millennium. It is argued that, while much has changed in world politics and scholarly agendas, global news is characterized more by continuity than change, and that the interesting differences are not between “then” and “now,” but between news outlets. The results of the analysis of 2189 newscasts, 7591 headlines and 5379 news items broadcast over a period of 13 years by four global news organizations (Al Jazeera English, BBC World, CNN International, and RT) call into question assumptions about the cosmopolitan nature of channels said to speak to the world. They show that only a small percentage of their news can be considered “global” in terms of topic and geographical scope, although there are thought-provoking differences in how the global is narrated. Taken together, they provide occasion to revisit the scholarly debate on global journalism.

Keywords: global journalism, global media, cosmopolitanism, Al Jazeera English, BBC World, CNN International, RT

Fifteen years ago, the state of global media studies had an optimistic hue. Admittedly, critical political economists continued to warn about the detrimental effects of media capitalism, and of “infotainment” pre-empting proper news (Thussu 2009), but a surge of interest in cosmopolitan outlooks in academia, and the launch of connective media technologies like Twitter in everyday life, found others gazing with hope and enthusiasm into the communicative space they envisaged beyond the borders of the nation. Roger Silverstone wrote inspiringly of the “mediapolis,” a term intended to capture something both empirical and normative, denoting the condition of media “in which relations between self and other are to be conducted in a global sphere.” There was eagerness to explore the mediated space “in which the world appears and in which the world is constituted

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in its worldliness, and through which we learn about those who are and who are not like us” (Silverstone 2007, 22, 31). On a more banal level, the authors of a much-used textbook (then in its seventh edition) claimed that global news media were playing a major role not only in informing the world, but in interesting people in it. After years of “looking inward” and ignoring news about the outside world, the authors of *The World News Prism* noted, frightened and insecure citizens were taking a serious interest in international affairs again. They were living in a much more global society, and international broadcasting had become “less propagandistic and more informative and entertainment-minded” (Hachten and Scotton 2006, ix–xi). Before long, media users the world over were not only being invited to take part in uprisings in Iran, Moldova, and the Arab world, co-present in time if not space, but also to use new media platforms to help pro-democracy activists stymie state attempts to prevent news of dissent from getting out.

Reviewing news broadcasts and re-reading news reports from these years can be a disorienting experience. Some things are familiar: Palestinian youths and Israeli soldiers clash, people protest for and against migration, and the public is kept mindful of the threat of global warming, be it thanks to media access enjoyed by Gore (then) or Greta (now). In other respects, the news of 15 years ago can seem as contemporary as an episode of *Madmen*. The attention of journalists and scholars alike has shifted from the connective potential of social media to how those very platforms enclose people in “filter bubbles,” insulating them from others and perpetuating misunderstandings rather than helping people encounter and learn about those who are different. It is no longer commonplace to read that the world has become a more global, single place or that people have become more outward-looking: indeed, there is much to suggest the opposite, with nationally competitive responses to a global pandemic, the US withdrawing, prior to the Biden presidency, from international agreements to halt climate change, the UK leaving the EU, and right-wing populists loudly questioning the benefits of globalization in country after country. Concerns about a surge in information warfare and reports of disinformation being planted in Western outlets by Russian sources suggest that the authors of *The World News Prism* were overly hasty in consigning propaganda to press history books.

The problem with claims made in such books, however, is not so much that they have been rendered obsolete. It is that they rest on shaky foundations, both conceptual and empirical. While there is a substantial literature on foreign, international and transnational news reporting (Archetti 2019; Clausen 2003; Cottle 2009a,b, 2011; Hanitzsch and Hanusch 2012; Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Rantanen 2005; Reese 2008, 2010; Segev 2016; Wasserman 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012), and on global journalism in national media (Berglez 2008, 2013; Van Leuven and Berglez 2016), the research gap yawns widely when it comes to

systematic, comparative analyses of the output of television channels that market themselves as global, and that speak to audiences beyond state borders. Such empirical engagement is necessary if we are to grasp what is global about global news, and to assess whether its globality has endured in the face of the developments sketched above. The aim of this article is to show how this might be done. To avoid the “snapshot” pitfall – the vulnerability of analysis that has its starting point in a particular moment in a rapidly evolving media-political landscape – an answer to the question “what is global about global news?” is sought in routine reporting over a period of 13 years. The contribution is partly methodological (how do we gain analytical purchase on the “global?”) and partly empirical (can generalizations be made, or do answers to the question vary depending on the newsroom?). The notion of “newsworld” is used throughout to designate the canvas that forms the backdrop to tumultuous events, like the crises and protests that are the foci of many case studies, but also the quotidian events that flicker across the screen on any given day; the depicted world in which discrete events are narrated and related. The results of the study presented in what follows show that the newsworlds of four global television channels differ in ways that could be thought to matter to their audiences’ understandings of problems shared by people everywhere, and to conceptualizations of global news and “the global newsroom.”

Those news organizations are worthwhile objects of study not just because they are under-researched, but because they comprise a spectrum of financing solutions and relations to political power. The corpus of 2189 newscasts, 7591 headlines and 5379 news items includes the output of an MNC-owned newsroom, long invoked as the epitome of global broadcasting (CNN International); a commercially-funded channel moored in the public service tradition of a democratic state (BBC World); one that is financed by the ruling dynasty of a monarchy in which political parties are not permitted (Al Jazeera English); and one bankrolled by an authoritarian government that has increasingly become associated with the propaganda that Hachten and Scotton claimed was on the wane (RT, formerly Russia Today). The answers to three broad questions have been sought. First, how “global” is the newsworld of each channel? Second, what are the contours of each of those newsworlds? And third, who populates them – whose voices are audible in global news reports? Before venturing into those newsworlds, however, a brief tour of the scholarly terrain is in order.

1 Studying Global News Conceptually

The literature on communication in societies living under conditions of globalization is littered with references to global, transnational, and international

media, and to foreign news reporting. Upon closer inspection, these often turn out to be unhelpful at best and confusing at worse. Just as Ulrich Beck wrote that we have become cosmopolitans “by default,” by virtue of living under globalization, Hamada (2016) has written that “thanks to communications technologies, no one can easily avoid the influence of global media” – whatever that means. Both ideas make intuitive sense, until further thought shows them to be vague or tautologous.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways of looking at news flows under globalization. One is optimistic. It sees in the work of journalists (as distinct from media technology) the potential to make connections between people separated by distance and culture (Archetti 2019; Beck 2006; Berglez 2008, 2013; Chouliaraki 2006; Cottle 2009a, 2011, 2019; Orgad 2012; Robertson 2010, 2015; Silverstone 2007; Tanikawa 2019a,b; Wasserman 2011). As Halsall (2006, 8) put it, global media have the power “to enable the human being to imagine the world as a whole.” The other way of looking at global news is more skeptical. Scholars such as Thussu (2009), Herman and McChesney (2001), McPhail (2014), and others working within the political economy tradition, have looked out into the global mediascape and seen news outlets driven by the profit-seeking agendas of their corporate owners, with a resultant proclivity to ply audiences with entertaining fare rather than the information required of citizens struggling to make sense of a complex world. Having dominated the literature on global media for many years, such accounts have been joined more recently by scholars whose brows are furrowed for other reasons. They discern a need to study news depictions of global issues from the perspective of soft power, propaganda, and strategic narratives because of state behavior and because “the increasingly interconnected world has affected the ability of groups and individuals to claim actorhood and attempt to set out narratives that may challenge or support dominant (and traditional) elite narratives” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 41). Seen in this way, the relevant currency is ideas rather than money, as they can change the information contexts in which states make policies. “Central to this ability is, of course, the ability to communicate across national borders” (ibid). Waisbord (2013, 132) had a point when he observed that media globalization is “a Rorschach blot of scholarly debates about contemporary dynamics and trends.”

Given that blot, what do people have in mind when they write about global news? According to Clausen (2003, 87), it is homogenous news that is usually about global topics (something she does not define) aimed at audiences around the world that are conceived of as communities with common interests in things like the environment or football. This is in essence what Grieves (2012) has in mind when writing of “transnational journalism.” Others argue that global news is not

homogenous at all, but varies according to what corner of the global village a newsroom is situated in. Writing at the same time as Clausen (2003), Lee et al. (2003) argued that the output of channels like CNN was inherently ethnocentric and state-centered. Dencik found evidence of this in the BBCW newsroom a decade later. The editorial practices she observed were situated in “a specific cultural context,” with news values shaped by perceptions of the global public interest “rooted in an understanding of news and newsworthiness that has developed within a specific political, institutional and journalistic culture” (Dencik 2013, 9). That culture was British, not global. Similarly, Hafez argued a decade ago that global journalism did not yet exist: there were “at best, various zones of transnationality, a western, an American, a European, Muslim, Arab or whatever” (Hafez 2011, 486–87). Brüggemann and Wessler (2014, 403) expressed similar skepticism. “In a globalized world” they wrote – despite the uprisings known as the “Arab Spring” having recently caught the interest of people worldwide – “there is no reservoir of cross-culturally shared values that event organizers, media, and audiences can easily activate to make sense of a specific event.”

The more optimistic Berglez found global journalism happening in national newspapers. As he defined it, global journalism had a particular epistemology, defined as the “global outlook:” instead of putting the nation in the center of the frame, it sought “to understand and explain how economic, political, social and ecological practices, processes and problems in different parts of the world affect each other, are interlocked, or share commonalities” (Berglez 2008, 847; see also Olausson 2013). Understood in this way, global journalism has to do with a particular kind of knowledge that originates in the mode of journalistic explanation. More recently, Tanikawa (2019a, 145) has also conceptualized global journalism in epistemological terms – as a sort or system of knowledge. For both of these authors, fulfilment of the criterion of global journalism is not achieved simply by journalism changing the object of reporting, “from nation-centered events to globally connected occurrences.” This would be changing the subject matter but not type of journalism. “If a journalism is said to have transitioned from the ‘national’ outlook to the ‘global’ outlook, it implies a change in the journalists’ system of knowledge upon which reporting is based” (Tanikawa 2019a: 1425; Brüggemann and Wessler 2014).

There are two problems with this. The first problem is that it is assumed, but not explained, why subject matter does not count towards a global credential. News consumers can hardly be expected to develop a global outlook if they encounter only national news. And media scholars face an impracticable workload if there is no readiness to look for insights in the documentation of the “what” and an insistence on only evaluating the “how,” which is methodologically much more difficult and time-consuming and renders general conclusions

unattainable. The second problem is that such conceptions of global journalism assume a linear development. As globalization becomes more entrenched and as journalists become aware of that entrenchment, journalism will change and become more “global” over time, according to this line of reasoning. But globalization is far from being an even process – not just in its spread, but also in its discursive incarnation (i.e. as something we imagine as well as something that impacts in practical and tangible ways on daily life). Even by the time Tanikawa was writing, in 2019, it had become more of a contested concept than it was when the “battle of Seattle” raged during the anti-WTO protests of 1999. Global journalism – to the extent that it exists – cannot be assumed to have an upwards trajectory. It could as well be a question of fits and starts, or cycles with more “global” peaks and more “national” troughs, in keeping with the prevailing mood or concerns of the times. The trajectory should thus be treated as an empirical question rather than an assumption, which is why the study reported in this article has attempted to see how the global fares on an everyday basis, over a period of more than a decade – from 2008, before the global financial crisis struck, to 2020, the year of a global plague.

Instead of setting the conceptual bar high while keeping the empirical bar low (building arguments on the backs of national newspaper content, as Berglez and Tanikawa do), what if we instead considered the output of newsrooms that define themselves as global broadcasters and who produce news for audiences everywhere? Rather than “zones” in which news has a certain inflection, the point of departure for the study reported here is that it can be fruitful to seek to understand the work of specific actors or organizations – such as BBCW or AJE or RT or CNNI – and to pay attention to how journalists approach the task of “reporting the world back to itself” (as AJE put it in an advert broadcast during its first week of operations) and of deciding who “the world” is. Surely journalists working in global newsrooms should be able to move beyond what Wasserman (2011) terms “old categories of national, international, foreign or domestic” and do this work differently, more naturally? At the same time, are such categories not actually perpetuated by scholars? How easy is it to move beyond them when studying news content? Not very, as it turns out.

Some arguments about media globalization, sighs Waisbord (2013, 133), “are assertions and hopes without sufficient empirical evidence.” Similarly, but less colorfully, Dencik (2013, 4) notes the lack of substantive empirical work on the shift to the global in media studies. In so doing, she echoes observations made over a decade ago by Cottle and Rai (2008), when they argued that there is a communicative complexity in the different structures that routinely deliver television news, and that this has gone largely unrecognized and unexplored. The next section sets out the methodology developed to help fill the research

gap – to explore the communicative architecture of different global newsrooms, sizing up their contours in terms of the topics their newsworlds are built with, and the voices of those who inhabit them.

2 Treating Global Journalism as an Empirical Question

One of the things Cottle and Rai drew attention to when developing their idea of communicative complexity was “the distinctive phenomenology of live 24/7 broadcasts,” with their program flow, cyclicity and fetish for live news. The fetish is not just a journalistic one, but has also been shared by scholars who have been “transfixed on this experiential ‘live’ quality” of television news (Cottle and Rai 2008, 162). The problem with this preoccupation is that it has obscured the routine, quotidian structures complicit in the packaging of the world for global as well as national audiences. By analyzing news output on a weekly basis across a period of 13 years, months, this study interrogates precisely such routine structuring.

The sample was comprised of one broadcast by each channel, every week, in the period from 15 September 2008 to 30 June 2020, with the exception of 2010 (for practical reasons). While every effort was made to use the same programs throughout the period under investigation, it proved difficult. The channels continually change their schedules (often without notice), replacing an advertised 30-min bulletin with a 60-min one, and vice versa. The moments in the news cycle studied here (one evening news program, broadcast at European primetime one day each week over the 13-year period) are nevertheless reasonably faithful reflections of Cottle and Rai’s structures, it could be argued. They can be thought of as the equivalents of the first shaft in the archaeological excavation of a mound. The preliminary probe does not replace the work with the sieve and fine brush (this happens at the stage of discourse or narrative analysis), but it does serve a useful surveying function, giving an indication of where would be good to dig more deeply, to expose the structures of mediated strategic narratives (see Robertson, Chiroiu, and Ceder 2018; Robertson, Chiroiu, and Grecu 2018).

The results presented in what follows were generated from the coding of two samples. The first was comprised of the headlines of broadcasts from 15 September 2008–30 June 2020 (“headlines”). One day per week was chosen and that day varies through the 13-year period. The second sample included the entire contents of the Monday broadcasts for two of those years: 2011 and 2015

(“items”). Table 1 shows the distribution of primary source material, across years and channels.

Headlines were coded for several reasons. One is that such simple primary source material allows for the efficient analysis of an unusually large corpus, with a high degree of inter-coder reliability. Another is that many viewers catch the headlines and little else. They are repeated at regular intervals throughout the 24/7 news flow and it is reasonable to expect they will leave a more lasting impression than the rest of the program on people not giving the news their full attention, or where the television is on in the background. Headlines, moreover, are an easily documented measure of news values, provide a lot of verbal and visual information about newsworlds, and contain evidence of frames (RT stands out in this respect).

Apart from the headline analysis, more labor-intensive coding of complete broadcasts (i.e. of the individual news items) was conducted to get more detail, and in particular to obtain a comparative overview of the voices used by the different newsrooms (apart from those of their own journalists) to tell the stories of what happens in their worlds.

How “global” is the newsworld of each channel? The point of this first broad question was to see whether the different channels paint pictures of a world comprised of states or one constituted differently, and whether or not the depicted worlds are characterized processes and problems that spill over national borders. A “global” checkbox in the codesheet was ticked if a headline or news item related to a global issue (such as terror, a pandemic, environmental or refugee crisis); if it was framed in global terms (e.g., “the world came one step closer to winning the battle against COVID-19 this week when ...”); if it was about the foreign affairs of an intergovernmental organization (such as the EU, Arab League or African Union) or the actions of NATO or the UN (such as a General Assembly meeting) or about the UN taking a stance for cosmopolitan principles (such as international law); if it concerned the actions of the International Criminal Court; or if it was about a global diaspora (e.g., “Muslims throughout the world have taken to the streets to show their outrage over the decapitation of a French schoolteacher ...”). This way of coding for global news is referred to in what follows as “global-as-issue.”¹

¹ The “global” option was *not* selected if the news was about the position of a specific state or states within an international government organization (e.g., “Mexico’s contender for the IMF presidency” or “Turkey says it will participate in NATO operations in Libya”); if the lead-in of an item was “global” but the story itself was local (“The WHO has issued new warnings about the spread of ebola. Here in Britain, the Scottish nurse who was infected is recovering in hospital”); if a global crisis was framed in a local context (“There is conflict in the Republican Party over President Trump’s announcement of new troop deployments in the war on Taliban terror”); or an IGO was

Beginning with this question means beginning with the most difficult coding of all the results presented here. The coding criteria for the “global checkbox” were reviewed continuously over the course of a year by members of the coding team, as newly occurring examples prompted re-evaluation. On more than one occasion, the temptation was to abandon the attempt to code this category, but the challenges involved were more interesting than the frustrations, so it was decided to persevere.

The second question – what are the contours of each newsworld? – was easier to operationalize and code for, and lent confidence to the endeavor of documenting the “global.” It was answered with the help of three sub-questions. How “big” was the world of each channel in the investigated period, i.e. how many different countries featured in the headlines and news items? Given that the literature on international news has long assumed the dominance of the West in general, and Anglo-Saxon countries in particular, and that news outlets challenging that hegemony have promised to report regions of the world ignored by the mainstream, another sub-question enquired as to which countries occurred most frequently. Here, coders chose from a list of officially recognized states, tweaked to include a number of additional options, found necessary in order to capture the nature of the reports. One of these was, again, “global,” this time referring not to the nature of a topic but to the location of the event. The global option in the “country list” was selected in the case of inter-regional or worldwide involvement, if two or more regions from different continents were involved, or more than five countries from at least two different continents. Coders could make up to three selections.

The question of whose voices were heard in global news broadcasts was answered by coding all the actors who spoke in the news items in the second sample. People who were seen but not heard were not coded, partly for reasons of feasibility, and partly because speaking actors have, at least potentially, a power of definition that silent actors do not. As with the topics, and for the same reason, a rather detailed list of 30 “speaking actors” was used, with results collapsed at a later stage of analysis. For each person who spoke in a news item, up to two roles on the list could be chosen. The gender of the speaking actor was also noted, whether they spoke English or were dubbed, and whether or not they were identified by name. This is particularly interesting when it comes to the narrative use of “ordinary people”: are they anonymous and unidentifiable, or treated with the same respect as government members? Previous research

only mentioned in a report about something else. World sporting events, Oscars and Nobel prizes and news about space were consigned to a “can’t be coded this way” category, as they could not be coded faithfully as either national or global concerns.

(Robertson 2010, 2015) led to the expectation that there would be significant differences between the channels, such as more elites in the BBC newsworld and that the “voiceless” (protesters, refugees, and ordinary people) would speak more often on AJE.

Using a bespoke coding database, a team of 20 coders of 14 nationalities took turns analyzing different channels and periods, to facilitate comparability, and avoid becoming exclusively immersed in one newsworld. The raw data recorded in the database was subsequently treated in SPSS, where the results were summarized in simple measures to answer the three broad questions guiding the study.

So how “global” is the newsworld of each channel? The simple answer, it transpires, is: not very.

As can be seen from Figure 1, there are few ups and downs when it comes to the “global” dimension of global news, apart from a 2011 RT peak (a reflection of the Russian outlet’s keen interest in dissent in the outside world), an uptick for AJE in 2014 (when the “voiceless” in Ferguson and Hong Kong shouted audibly) and for all channels in the COVID pandemic year of 2020. The proportion of global news in global newscasts, when calculated on the basis of the coding of 7591 headlines, is between 7.6% (CNNI) and 9.2% (RT), when the results for all coded years are averaged. AJE’s average of 8.9% places the Doha-based channel behind RT, followed then by BBCW with 8.2%. The first six months of 2020 stand out, with an average of 18% global headlines, when all channels are counted. Out of the four channels, AJE leads significantly, with 23.5% of its headlines being global (by far the highest percentage throughout the period). CNNI tops the ranking in the last three months of 2008, with 14.3% of its headlines being global. RT has a similar leading score in 2011 (15% of its headlines were coded as “global”) and in 2012 ranks first with 10%. In 2013 and 2015 it was BBCW that had the highest share (10% both years), while AJE had more than twice as much global news in their 2014 headlines than either BBCW or CNNI (12% compared to 5 and 4%). In 2016, AJE had the highest share (9%, followed by RT at 7%) while the share in all channels dipped to around 6% in 2017. RT takes the lead again 2018 and 2019, scoring close to 12% global headlines both years.

The top of the broadcast is, of course, only part of the picture. Could it be that the paucity of global news in the headlines is a reflection of the fact that global issues are complex, requiring more explanation in longer pieces farther down in the broadcast, and have to do with processes rather than the dramatic events and breaking news that make the headlines? If so, the coding of the news items themselves, and not just the headlines, should yield different results. They do, as it turns out, but the share of global items in the broadcast as a whole is not impressively higher. As mentioned above, the second sample comprised the entire

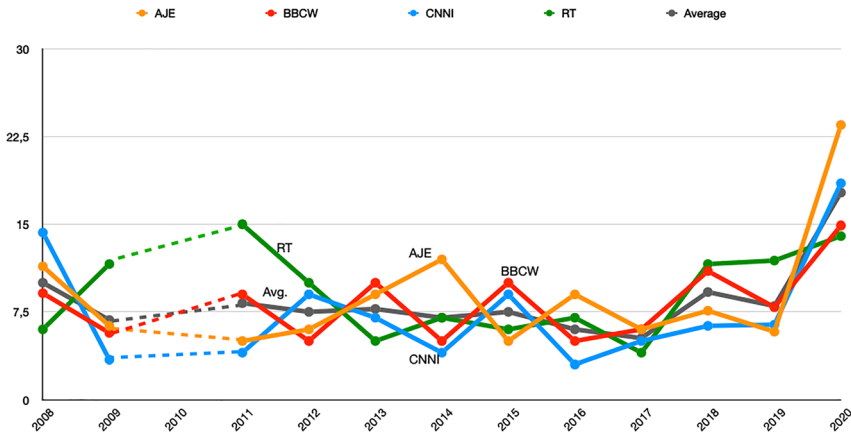


Figure 1: How much does “global” news figure in the newsworlds of the four global channels in the study? The lines indicate the percentage of headlines coded as dealing with “global” issues in the broadcasts of Al Jazeera English (AJE), BBC world news (BBCW), CNN international (CNNI), and RT (formerly Russia Today), 15 September 2008–30 June 2020.

Monday broadcasts of two years (2011 and 2015). In this sample, which is smaller in terms of newsdays, but not units of analysis (5379 items were coded), BBCW’s figure goes from an average 7% in the headlines to 9% in the items, CNNI’s from 6 to 10%, and RT’s from 8 to 12%. The figure for the proportion of global news in AJE remains unchanged, at 8%.

Do these figures faithfully capture the nature of the studied news output, or are they a methodological artifact? To make sure, the second question looked for global news in a slightly different way, by sounding out the contours of the different newsworlds. It revealed more similarities, but also some interesting differences between the channels.

As all of the channels in this study have a global remit, and purport to speak to viewers everywhere, it seemed pertinent to ask how big their world maps are. A first answer to this question was sought by establishing how many countries feature in the headlines in the sample (“how big is the world of each broadcaster?”). Do the tops of the programs reflect the fact that the world is comprised of 194 countries (depending on how one counts)? As can be seen from Figure 2A,B, the AJE newsworld is consistently the biggest, and CNNI’s is always the smallest (a position shared, for some years, with RT). By the end of the sampled period, BBC’s World had shrunk somewhat. What Figure 2A,B did not show is the finding – perhaps unsurprising – that the US is always in the top three most frequently mentioned countries in the headlines of all the channels.

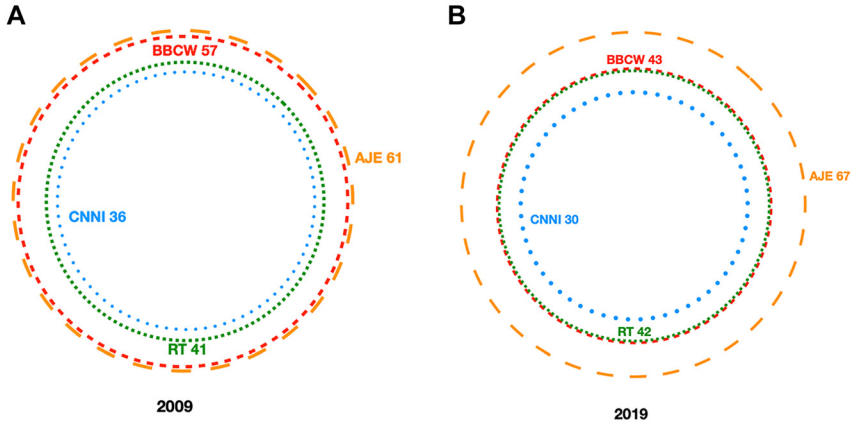


Figure 2: (A, B) How big are the newsworlds of the four global channels in the study? The size of the rings is based on the number of countries appearing in the headlines in 2009 and 2019 in AJE, BBCW, RT, and CNNI. Beside the name of each channel is the number of countries mentioned at least once in the broadcasts of the respective channel.

Who populated the newsworlds of the different channels? The results of coding done using an extensive list of actor categories can be collapsed under different headings depending on the need of a given analysis, and what previous research leads us to expect. For example, in a study of protest reporting, the actor categories were grouped under the headings of elites, law-and-order, civil society/protester and non-elites. When global news is in focus, other groupings are more interesting. Elites remain for obvious reasons, but given that global problems have the greatest impact on people whose jobs are threatened by the worldwide financial crisis, whose lives are threatened by a pandemic, terrorism, or political violence, whose homes are destroyed in the wake of climate-change-related extreme weather, and who have been forced to flee for sanctuary in other continents and countries, of more interest to the present study is how often the voices of “ordinary people”, and ordinary people in special circumstances, such as refugees, were heard in global news reports.

When the 30 actor categories at the disposal of coders are collapsed into a smaller number of thematic ones – elites, civil society, ordinary people and refugees – the similarities between the channels, when it comes to whose voices are heard in global news reports, are striking. The elite category accounts for 77% of all speaking actors coded in CNNI, 75% in RT, 73% in AJE and 71% in BBCW. In a distant second place are “ordinary people” in CNNI (19%), BBCW (12%) and AJE (11%). In AJE, civil society ties for second place, and it is second in RT (14%). Civil

society is in third place in BBCW (9%) and CNNI (2%). “Ordinary people” are in third place in RT (10%), a position occupied by refugees in AJE (5%).

But the large collective categories hide some differences between the channels. For the purposes of Figure 3, “experts” have been extracted from the category of “elites” and pictured separately. Displaying the results in this way highlights some interesting things. AJE, which claims to give “a voice to the voiceless” does, but only to a limited extent. (The results are different when the sample is news coded as “involving protest” rather than “global,” but that is another story, see Robertson, Chiroiu, and Grecu 2018). When attention is turned to the frequency of individual actor-roles, rather than the larger thematic categories illustrated by the hands in Figure 3, it transpires that AJE’s most frequently heard actor is a global one – a member or representative of an IGO (14%). In CNNI, it is a national actor: head of government (19%). In both BBCW (14%) and especially RT (30%) the most frequently heard actor is the expert. Perhaps the most striking result, however, is the extensive use of “experts” in RT to narrate stories strategically (see Robertson 2017; Robertson, Chiroiu, and Grecu 2018 for more on this trait). There is more to be said and studied about voice, but visibility and point of view are equally compelling foci, so merit a few words as we consider the way forward.

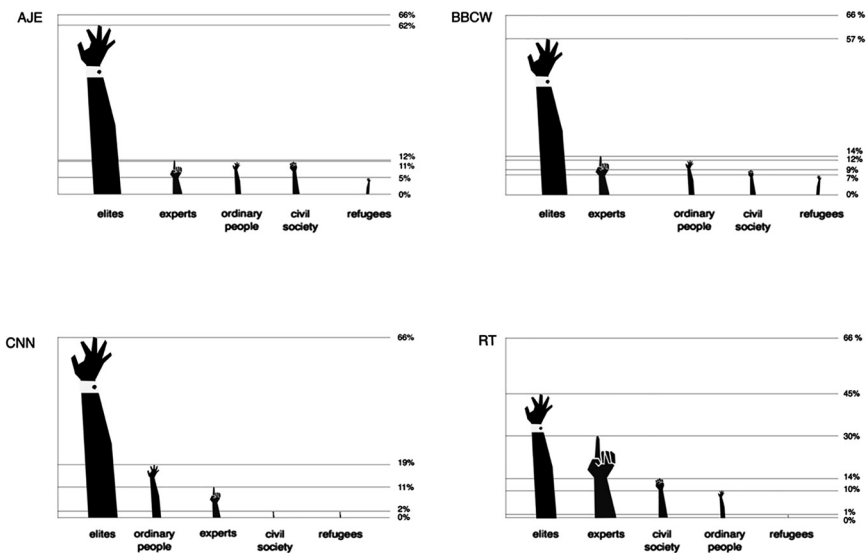


Figure 3: Speaking actors in the news items coded as “global” in the Monday broadcasts of AJE, BBCW, CNNI, and RT, 2011, and 2015. The percentages are based on the total number of “speaking actors” for each channel (excluding the reporter).

3 Global Outlooks

For some scholars, global journalism is “conceptually congruous with the cosmopolitan conception of journalism” (Tanikawa 2019a, 1425). And indeed, it could be said that Berglez’s “global outlook” is, in essence, what Beck (2006) had in mind when he wrote of the “cosmopolitan outlook”. This is contrasted with “counter-global” use of stereotypes and domestication strategies, a “prevalent” reporting style in which a national figure or product is a central feature in a foreign story (Tanikawa 2019b, 923). But why should this be thought of as counter-global? Are such strategies now part of the task that Berglez and Tanikawa set journalists – the drawing of connections between there and here, between the global and the local – as opposed to treating things as foreign? Is this not part of the discursive construction of globalization – the ability to imagine “global” things as being close to home and one’s own lifeworld?

To imagine global things, they need to be rendered visible. More than that: the viewer should be given an opportunity to see them from different vantage points. The question of determining where the line is to be drawn between recognizing diversity and perpetuating stereotypes is far from simple, and merits a discussion of its own, but two examples can prove illustrative. They return us to Silverstone’s mediapolis.

Comparing how the four channels in this study reported the global refugee crisis in 2018, Robertson and Schaetz (2019) found that different global newsrooms reported the crisis in different ways – ways that offer different answers to the question of what might be a “proper distance” to strike towards others, and who those others might be. The differences between the approaches are mostly visible when juxtaposing CNNI and AJE reporting, which the quantitative results presented above also indicated had the smallest and biggest newsworlds. Even when purporting to speak to the world, CNN is clearly aligned to the “emergence, constitution and reproduction of collective (national) identities” (Hänska 2018) while the AJE could be thought more conducive to the cultivation of global (Berglez 2008) or cosmopolitan (Robertson 2010) outlooks, as highlighted by reporting on World Refugee Day 2018.

CNNI’s Hala Gorani ended the broadcast that day by reminding viewers that the migration crisis is a global problem. The images “we” have been seeing at the U.S. border, she tells viewers, are not unique to the Americas: Europe is also struggling with its biggest refugee crisis since World War II. The problem as she frames it is one experienced journalists and their audiences, rather than the people fleeing persecution and death. “The scale of trauma and devastation that it has caused is simply too great for any one of us to comprehend fully,” she says to the

camera. “In fact, that’s why we often home in on one particular story, one particular face, because it feels like the only we can begin to relate is to do that.” Gorani speaks then of a “different approach” to the problem taken by another news organization. “Look at this!” she urges viewers, holding up a printed copy of that day’s *Guardian* newspaper. Noting that the text “may be too small for you to read at home” she explains that it contains the name and cause of death of every single migrant who has died trying to reach Europe since 1993. “It’s this type of thing that I think brings home, because the scale of it – you see how thick it is [*she holds up the newspaper*] brings home the magnitude of the crisis, as Europe continues to try to find a way to respond to it.”

Despite her obvious outrage at nationalist policies and empathy for people experiencing a global crisis, and her direct appeals to viewers “at home,” Gorani does not invite those viewers to see the migration crisis from a position that is not their own. In contrast, as the CNN anchor was holding up a newspaper replete with thousands of tiny words, too small to see at home, rather than faces and voices, AJE was taking its viewers down from what it calls the “high helicopter” view to visit Afghan refugees in Thessaloniki (“These people are trapped and they’re living like dogs. In the absence of any coherent European policy...this is the human result”), Syrian refugees in Turkey (“Ahmed’s situation shows some of the complex problems that bedevil the lives of about four million people who fled the war in Syria”), a rescue ship steered by the Spanish captain who saves people drowning in the Mediterranean (“It is the greatest satisfaction you can have, when you rescue people”), and the camp home of a Rohingya who has fled to Bangladesh (“The ground has literally collapsed beneath Mohammed’s feet.”). The “others” in AJE stories of migration are not “illegals” or “swarms of migrants”: they are squabbling politicians who deny people the right to have rights and who make it difficult for civil society, and for ordinary people with whom viewers might identify, to do the morally right thing. In so doing, a discursive connection is formed between “ordinary people” in far-flung places (Robertson and Schaetz 2019).

The second example is also from Al Jazeera English, and also involves “others,” and the rendering of the invisible visible. A series called *Surprising Europe*, broadcast on television and on AJE’s website and YouTube channel, explores European society using a unique rhetorical technique. All the reporters are undocumented African migrants, whose stories reverse the gaze and who bring the viewer close to other migrants, in their bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, and music rooms. The reports are framed using visual metaphors of connection and disconnection – stairs and escalators with Africans going up and down; water, bridges, and boats suggesting connections (bridges bring people and places together) and, conversely, asylum-seekers depicted as being “at sea,” both literally and metaphorically. This “type” of reporting, to use Berglez’s phrase, comprises

practical applications of Silverstone's idea that global media provide a space in which to encounter the Other. This is to say that, while it has been argued that Berglez and Tanikawa are setting the bar high, they are also onto something. Narratives circulating through global newsrooms like AJE provide more sophisticated imaginative tools than acknowledged by those who study communication flows from a perspective of critical political economy.

4 Summing Up the News

The answers to the three broad questions posed at the outset – how “global” is the newsworld of each channel, what are the contours of those worlds, and who populates them? – showed that, on a denotative level of analysis, there are striking similarities between newsrooms moored in quite different political and institutional settings, and financed in quite different ways. The most obvious, and perhaps disheartening one, is how little “global” news there is in global newscasts. But analysis has revealed differences as well, that could be thought to matter to the way viewers conceive of problems shared by people everywhere.

Hafez claims that many countries never, or hardly ever, occur in the news because they are not deemed newsworthy. “The limitation of the world in the mainstream news to tiny bits of event-centred information,” he writes, “leads to an enormous fragmentation, de-contextualization and a dangerous loss of complexity” (Hafez 2011, 485). The results presented in this article indicate there are problems with generalizations like these. Some broadcasters make room for significantly more countries in their newsworlds than others. AJE made room at the top of its broadcast for news about 67 of the 195 countries in the world in 2019, which is not what Hafez says. His claim is more convincing when CNNI and RT are used as evidence.

Thussu (2009) used the phrase “CNNization” to describe how the output of global 24/7 channels had become “sensationalized and trivialized through high-tech reporting.” While RT does have a penchant for the sensational, the person who watches AJE and BBCW on a regular basis is not likely to be struck by the trivial. High-tech reporting is also less noteworthy than the jerky footage shot by a cameraman following a correspondent through a conflict zone or the grainy footage often, and not entirely accurately, referred to as “amateur video” or UGC. This matters to scholars like Pantti (2013, 201–2) who argues that such eyewitness images from distant events could “contribute to the ‘world openness’ forged from encounters of the local with the global.” These impressions await closer scrutiny at the sieve-and-fine-brush stage; it is work beyond the scope of this preliminary excavation.

A quarter of a century ago, Nick Stevenson opined that the transformation of the media was one of the most important changes facing global societies, with the spatial flows of satellite broadcasting putting people in touch with the lives of others they had never met, and stretching the outlines of their communities (Stevenson 1999). Reviewing the literature on international communication back then, he noted the existence, on the one hand, of polemics with little evidence and, on the other, documentation of interesting features of the field with no explanation. This study does not really match either description, but is admittedly more documentation than explanation. It has been conducted in the conviction that such documentation is a necessary first step in the study of maps of meaning.

A study of news content has limitations. The superficial coding of the “what” produced some insights into the extent to which global newscasts contain global news. But coding the “how” – the framing of the news stories themselves, the way the narratives are structured – is needed to complete the picture. Previous research has shown that quantitative and qualitative analysis of such reporting can yield substantially different results (Robertson 2010), and it is in the telling of the news stories, rather than their content, that the discursive connections are made in which global meaning can be made and, perhaps, cosmopolitan outlooks fostered.

There are other limitations to analysis of content. Empirically-supported explanations of the differences found in the analysis presented here can only be provided by production studies, forays into the newsroom and interviews. The significance of the content can only be established by studies of audience reception (which in the case of global publics are a challenging endeavor, to say the least) or studies of policy change (no less daunting, if any causality is to be inferred). This article thus requires no adjustment by Stevenson to his 1999 conclusions, in the absence of explanation and disinclination to polemic. But it does bring new evidence to the table. It calls into question the cosmopolitan nature of at least some channels that purport to speak to the world, and cautions against generalizations about the “global newsroom.” While further engagement with the narrative frames, as well as basic features, of global news broadcasts is needed, it is evident that even outlets that call themselves global rely heavily on national borders, even if only discursively.

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