Global News After the Cold War

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After the Cold War

With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War ended. The media not only watched, but played a crucial role in the years after 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, as rapid developments dramatically changed the world as we had known it. Images of seminal change agents in what had been the Eastern bloc—Gorbachav, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel—facing leaders from the West—Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl and Pope John Paul II—mingled with those of explosions at Chernobyl and Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Bucharest crowds who brought down a Romanian tyrant. Reagan met with Moscow dissidents. Gorbachev pressed the flesh on the streets of New York. In Moscow, an attempted coup by old-style Soviet hard-liners failed in large part because of communication technology—Yeltsin could reach the rest of the world by fax, and CNN showed everyone (Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Bush and the putschists alike) what was happening at the barricades. A new world.

On this cusp, the media did more than simply record the images and report the story. Some, such as the brave samizdat (underground) newspapers of Eastern Europe, took incredible risks in the face of harsh punishment and even death. In the West, CNN, the BBC, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, along with other electronic media, assaulted the system of official lies, disinformation and distortion that had long been part of the Cold War communist apparatus. And, after a so-called Year of the Dominos, when socialist govern-
ments in nation after nation fell to forces of democratization, Westerners rallied to offer what aid they could to fledgling news media, universities and journalist associations trying to fashion new media systems. In Eastern Europe and the Baltics (and more slowly in the Balkans), the mass media redefined their central purpose, reporting not to and for the state, but to and for their audiences. Journalism in these former authoritarian redoubts was redefined and, with it, the role of the journalist. There were and are risks: Beyond ever-present dangers to those engaging in free expression, the manufacturing system that had supported the socialist media shifted from the predictable safety net of government support to the uncertainties of a market economy. With freedom came the perils of the marketplace.

WITH THIS ISSUE of the Media Studies Journal, we open the door to both the tidings from abroad and the implications of such tidings for a world community. It is our modest intention in these pages to begin an inventory of sorts of the state of "Global News After the Cold War." The world may have been a simpler place when aligned along East-West lines, but it also was an incomplete place, at least as defined by the pages of newspapers and the evening news. In Roseville, Minn., there was little word of life in Tajikistan; in Little Rock, who ever heard of ethnic troubles in Yugoslavia? Now, readers and viewers can know almost as much as they want to about those distant, formerly inaccessible places (although we still can't hear the trees falling in the People's Republic of China and other still-closed corners). The window on the world is wider now, a result of the new world order, as disorderly and confusing as it might be. For the media, the goal is to catch up with the world's changes and to develop a new overarching structure for covering news after the Cold War.

As essays in this Journal demonstrate, the world is moving incrementally (or rapidly in some instances) toward a global society of global media. The dimensions of this change carry implications not only for media people and media organizations everywhere, but also for governments worldwide and the citizens they represent. There is now greater access for newspeople and others who want to see places
that once were taboo. Further, media firms with the itch for global reach now can buy properties almost anywhere they want, whether it is Rupert Murdoch and the late Robert Maxwell moving into Central and Eastern Europe, or Murdoch’s share of STAR TV in Hong Kong, whose signal stretches across Asia, or the Japanese buying up U.S. movie companies. CNN seems to be everywhere, as is the BBC World Service, which has long led the way in achieving a global reach.

If the Cold War once defined the nature of media activities and the shape and contour of news coverage, its demise offered enormous challenges as media people and institutions groped for new directions and mandates. With the confluence of technological and political change, the idea that all people should have access to information from any corner of the globe was, at last, possible. In its surveillance of the world, the news media once focused on issues and events made significant by the East-West struggle. The rules of newsworthiness were fairly clear. The amount of coverage a given country got was largely a function of its importance in the East-West conflict. The more loyalties were mixed, the greater the conflict and the greater the coverage. Thus, because it was seen as a staging ground for ideological differences, Central America was more important than many larger and wealthier regions, as were parts of South America, Africa and Asia. Occasionally, vital bilateral relationships like that of Japan and the United States (representing 40 percent of the world’s economy) were exceptions. That legacy of fear—the West’s fear of communism and East’s fear of capitalism—resulted in a distorted and fragmented view of the world. That worldview recognized only three or four trouble spots, with much of the rest of the globe missing from the media’s collective radar screen, out of sight and largely out of mind.

That left most of the globe and its people unaccounted for. A country like Indonesia, now the world’s fourth largest, got in the news in the West only when its leader (first Sukarno, then Suharto) rattled sabres or brutally quelled a revolt in East Timor. South Africa was on the U.S. news map because Americans saw it as a reflection of their own racial and civil rights problems, and because those involved in the struggle there could attract world media to their story. News is
much more than editors making gatekeeping decisions, however. The other player is the audience, which affects the media “dance” through its interest level and attention span. Some commentators fear that the U.S. public’s interest in international affairs is weak, and that this might lead to what one French observer calls “the closing of the American oyster—again.” Certainly, views of the general public and those of policy makers and editorial page writers on given foreign-policy initiatives (foreign aid, for example) often represent polar opposites. Given the realities of globalism, the media have a special challenge to make international news and global interrelationships not just palatable but compelling enough to draw the kind of keen reader and viewer interest they warrant.

Such attention to news from afar always has been fleeting and fickle, as author and humorist Calvin Trillin points out in a recent poem, “Whatever Happened to Cyprus?” What, indeed?

Even though some of the most gifted Western journalists made up the international correspondents’ corps, they were so caught up in geopolitical concerns that the stories they produced (coup and earthquakes) were largely event-oriented. At the same time on the U.S. domestic front, journalists were creating a new journalism, one that was more issue- and process-oriented, less caught up in heavy-breathing public affairs coverage. While some decried the soft nature of some of the “new news,” that approach also helped reform the formerly rigid news formula. Human-interest stories and trend analysis that never would have made the newscast or the front page in the past earned new currency. In that context, international news seemed old-fashioned, utterly committed to a worldview based almost always on geopolitics.

Today, the need for a new news agenda is evident, but so are barriers to that notion. One is the tendency to drift back to insularity, wherein more local and national news pushes out news from abroad. Still another is the clear indication in polls and other soundings that people and editors are not all that eager to process and digest international news when it competes with news from the domestic front.
The news media's greatest challenge is to explicate a concept of 
globalism and global news coverage with dedication to the idea that all 
parts of the world should be represented, lest we lose the chance to be 
fully informed. It is no longer satisfactory in a global society to attend to 
only a few countries at a time. The educated and informed person who 
is conversant in the global society must know not only what is happen­
ing in all parts of the globe, but also across thematic topics such as glob­
al economics, environment, technology and ideology.

Essential to such understanding is the media's ability to map the 
world more equitably. As always, this is easier said than done. In spite 
of dramatic changes in the world, there has been little logical reas­
ignment of the world's dwindling international press corps. Such 
shifting will take time, connected to the perceived importance of a 
given continent, country or capital. But this is the first opportunity 
since the end of World War II for the press to redefine its worldview. 
In resetting its global compass, the press must reassert the right of 
readers and viewers to comprehensive news of the globe, presented 
with coherence and context. Further, in recalibrating their news 
agendas for an informed citzenry, editors should reconsider how to 
cover a world of multilateral and global alliances, recognizing that 
Europe, the Islamic bloc, Africa, Latin America and Asia all must be 
included. Finally, media entepreneurs, scholars, students and other 
observers must recognize their mutual interest in understanding the 
interconnectedness of a mutually dependent global society.

Clearly this is a time for hard thought. It is easy 
to inveigh against parochialism and isolationism, fearing that 
the "American oyster" may be closing, but quite another to find the 
wherewithal for a commercially successful media system that can 
maintain the flow of information as its highest priority. Information 
is of no value if it doesn't connect with an audience that finds the 
news useful and pertinent to everyday life. No one yet knows how to 
cover the whole world. As one visitor here once noted after traveling 
the world to cover seven wars that had rarely surfaced in Western 
media, it really has never been done.

Because the end of the Cold War demands reflection by the
media on how to approach the new global equation, we have devoted
this issue of the *Media Studies Journal* to that process and have invited
leading editors, commentators, foreign policy experts, diplomats and
scholars to speculate with us on the face of the media after the Cold
War. Unlike earlier issues of the *Journal* on “International News and
Foreign Policy” (Fall 1989) and “World Media” (Fall 1990), this issue
contains more reflection than research, since the world is still sorting
out its post-Cold War character. We hope the assessments here by our
pundits and commentators will stimulate scholarship that tracks and
guides the global media as they adapt to a changed world that offers
both opportunities and perils for policy-makers and those who cover
them. In 22 essays, this *Journal* charts some of the waters through
which U.S. media and the foreign press must navigate.

The introductory section includes global views from commentators representing both the media and foreign policy communities. Leading off is James F. Hoge Jr., editor of the journal *Foreign Affairs* and a veteran journalist and former Center senior fellow. In his view, “With the Cold War over, press and public share a new awareness of the extent to which other pressing international issues and domestic problems went unattended.” Those issues and the relationship between the press and foreign-policy formation are explored by diplomats and journalists in interviews with Center researcher Jon Vanden Heuvel, who concludes that “the ‘new world order’ has left the international scene as disorderly as it’s ever been.” Agreeing, the former editor of the London-based *Index on Censorship*, Andrew Graham-Yooll, observes that “nobody knows where the limits are, and few have tested them.” But Henry Grunwald, former editor in chief of Time Inc. and U.S. ambassador to Austria from 1988 to 1990, suggests that opportunities never have been greater for the media to open up “valleys of the uninformed.”

Next, in six essays on “How U.S. Media Cover the World,” our authors examine how global media organizations are adapting to the new world order. Bernard Gwertzman, the *New York Times*’ foreign editor, shares his internal musing with the *Times* foreign staff on how newspapers must redefine news priorities. Associated Press President
Louis D. Boccardi expands on Gwertzman’s memo with his own reflections on how “the end of the Cold War has been nothing but good for journalism.” And, in this period of reassessment, it is useful to hear from the other side—the diplomat’s view. That is the role of Jack F. Matlock Jr., the last U.S. ambassador to a unified Soviet superpower, who offers a candid assessment of the role of the press in foreign-policy formation in an extended interview with Journal Editor Edward C. Pease.

Then, from Beijing, the Christian Science Monitor’s Sheila Tefft reminds us that not all of the world has changed. “Covering the world’s last major communist power in the midst of extraordinary global economic and social change has turned the foreign press in Beijing into journalistic schizophrenics,” she says.

Foreign correspondence is an old and revered art, as the next two authors observe. Stephen Hess, a media scholar and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, reports on his survey of 764 foreign correspondents about what makes a great one. It is a who’s who of the trench-coat clan. And one longtime member of that extended family, former Center senior fellow Bernard Kalb, who started his overseas career with a story from Antarctica in 1955, reminisces on the days when reporters yelled, “Follow that tank!”

In the next section, nine authors reporting from Moscow to Tokyo and Johannesburg to Jakarta offer their “Global Views—How the World Covers Itself.” Opportunities abound, they say. Two views from Russia open the section. Alexander Shalnev, Izvestia’s longtime U.S. correspondent, reports that his paper has weathered the transformation from state sponsorship to independence. But there’s no travel money, he says, “so I may never find out why Soviet journalists were banned from Las Vegas.” Alexei Izyumov, a columnist for Newsweek International, visiting professor at the University of Tulsa and former Center fellow, observes that after defeating authoritarianism, Russian journalists have encountered a more potent foe—free-market economics. “Two years after the fall of communism, the Russian media are only just beginning to recover from the shock of victory,” he writes from Moscow.
Next comes word from Africa. Tunji Lardner, a Nigerian journalist and 1992-93 Center research fellow, hopes the Western press will "rewrite the tale of the 'dark continent.'" A less racist and more rational media view of Africa is overdue, he says. From South Africa, journalist, author and journalism institute director Allister Sparks discusses how perestroika has been translated to "Pretoriaestroika," with opportunities for both the nation and media of South Africa.

From Pretoria we shift to Tokyo, where Toyozo Tanaka, head of the editorial board of the 8 million-circulation newspaper Asahi Shimbun, discusses Japan's responsibilities in a new world order. And in Jakarta, Mochtar Lubis, a legend in Asian journalism circles, suggests that the "ongoing process of the global birth of freedom will be the biggest story in contemporary human history."

Meanwhile, in the Caribbean, the last of Soviet troops are gone from Cuba, and U.S. preoccupation with Latin American has waned. But, as Edward Seaton, editor of the Manhattan (Kan.) Mercury and former president of the Inter American Press Association, maintains, the region deserves more than American indifference. Similarly, the Middle East is still regrouping from the Persian Gulf war, which helped accelerate the spread of communications technology throughout the Arab world, as University of Kentucky scholar Douglas A. Boyd relates. Meanwhile, Britain enjoys more international prestige than its military and economic clout might indicate. Part of the reason is the preeminence of British broadcasting. "The British may have lost an empire," says veteran journalist Patrick Keatley, "but they refuse to lose the habit of thinking globally."

The first test for the media—and for global diplomacy—after the Cold War certainly was the ongoing war in the former Yugoslavia. How well have the media met that test? we asked two commentators. Well enough, responds ABC "Nightline" correspondent David Marash, who has covered Bosnia extensively. Poorly, objects Predrag Simić, director of a policy think tank in Belgrade. In "The Case of Yugoslavia," Marash and Simić go head to head in a debate over press policy and performance in the Balkan conflict.

Finally, John Maxwell Hamilton, director of the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University and a former
official at the World Bank, takes seven books on the media and international affairs as a launching point for his essay on the media's responsibilities in a new world order. Forget the Cold War, he says. The new overarching global structures are interdependence, fragmentation and environmentalism.

WITH THESE ESSAYS as a starting point, this issue of the Media Studies Journal hopes to move the debate over the expectations of the media in global affairs to a new plane, where questions of press policy and foreign policy can be taken together. For they certainly are intertwined, as Ambassador Matlock points out. It's been some 30 years since Marshall McLuhan pointed out the interconnectedness of the world in a dawning information age. Now, with that age fully upon us and the dangerous tensions of the Cold War finally past, it is time to develop the full potential of a global village in a peaceful world.

THE EDITORS