

The Rise of International and Local Media Outside the West: Really Helps Counter-hegemonic News?

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Abstract

The rise of third world media in recent years seems to be starting to change the monopoly of Western journalism by media outlets like the *BBC* and *CNN*. This article critically analyses the current situation of local media through the perspectives of anti-hegemonic journalism, soft power, press freedom and orientalism, with examples such as *Al Jazeera*, *RT* and *Phoenix TV*. The analysis reveals that the local media do have a limited freedom of the press through an independent business model that plays a counter-hegemonic journalistic role. At the same time, however, the complexity of political, economic and religious beliefs still severely restricts its growth.

Keywords: anti-hegemonic journalism, soft power, press freedom, orientalism

1. Introduction

The monopoly of journalism in the Western world has been represented by the hegemonic presence of Western media such as the *BBC* and *CNN*. The rise of third world media such as *Al Jazeera*, *RT* and *Phoenix TV* in the 1980s began to change this situation. This paper analyses the impact of the emergence of local media through the perspective of counter-hegemonic journalism, soft power, press freedom and Orientalism. The following questions are discussed: firstly, did the emergence of local media counter the hegemonic press or did they only allow themselves to be heard? Secondly, how does the emergence of media as a soft power counterbalance the West through a public diplomacy approach? Thirdly, has the emergence of third world media contributed to the emergence of press freedom? Are there limits to this freedom? Fourthly, is this a revision or a hybrid of Orientalism?

2. Background

The phrase international news is derived from traditional, historical content and aims to inform a global audience of world events in a variety of languages and representations. Under the influence of the Cold War, the American media industry began to develop rapidly after the Second World War and soon monopolised the global media network and built up its own vast media industry on top of it (Sharon Wang and Hong, 2011). For some time, the West could be able to transmit information to the world through advanced news agencies, especially those using satellite transmissions. This fact solidified its hegemonic press position. At the same time, because of the prominence of the well-known US media outlet *CNN* during the Cold War, the CNN effect emerged, which refers to the important role that global television networks play in determining the actions taken by policy makers and the outcome of events (Seib, 2005). Until the early 21st century, the world's major transnational communications markets were mainly located in Western countries or Japan, and most other media outlets were heavily dependent on the US market (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008). On this basis, scholars have developed the concept of 'media imperialism', which is not an individual phenomenon but part of the process of modern imperialism in its totality (Fejes, 1981). In his 1976 book *Communication and Cultural Domination*, Herbert Schiller, a leading American communication scholar, first explicitly stated that cultural imperialism is "the process by which a society is forced by external pressures to accept the values of the core forces in the modern world system and to adapt its social system to that world system as it moves into the modern world system (Roach, 1997)."

In 1980, UNESCO published the report of its International Commission on the Study of Communication, *Many Voices, One World*, also known as the McBride Report. The report pointed out that there was a predominance of

Western countries and media in news coverage and that the dissemination of information was unbalanced and one-sided. It also pointed out the huge differences between the media in developed and developing countries due to technological problems and the need for developing countries to have a voice of their own. The UK and the US withdrew from UNESCO in 1984-1985 and argued that this coverage restricted press freedom and expressed concern about the new system of state-funded propaganda (Mansell and Nordenstreng, 2006).

In this context, media liberalisation has been a global trend since the 1980s in order to balance the content and perspective of coverage, provide a fair platform and perspective for third world countries and counter the hegemonic press of the Western world, transforming domestic media markets and influencing transnational communication (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008). The gradual emergence of media outlets such as *Al Jazeera*, *RT* and *Phoenix* represents a worldwide shift in the technological and communicative policies governing the operation, establishment and content of the media, and challenges the dominance of the West in journalism.

3. Counter-hegemony: The Rise of Multiple Voices

After the collapse of BBC Arabic Television (BBCATV) following the withdrawal of funding for the Saudi Princess documentary, the best BBCATV staff were hired to set up *Al Jazeera* (Seib, 2005) with the endorsement of some relatively moderate Arab leaders with a moderate attitude towards the media. *Al Jazeera* also launched an English-language channel (AJE) in 2006, not as a medium 'for Arabs' and 'for Arabs', but as a global alternative voice that redefined 'alternative media' and reversed the flow of information. Claiming to be neither controlled by geopolitical interests nor dependent on commercial benefits, it was the first media outlet with the resourcing, authority and journalistic ability to reach often disconnected and ignored populations around the world. This was a challenge to the CNN effect as well as a powerful protest against the hegemonic news of the West (Coudry, 2006).

Al Jazeera first really caught the world's attention after the 9/11 attacks on the United States. It published interviews with two Al-Qaeda members who admitted that Al-Qaeda had planned and carried out the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi also publicly stated at the same time that he considered the attacks to be "terrible and destructive" (Powers and el-Nawawy, 2009). In addition, Al-Jazeera is well known for the US war on Afghanistan. It claimed that the US would only focus on news before the bombs landed, while *Al Jazeera* would focus on what happened after the bombs fell. Western broadcasters were denied access to the story, making it the only media outlet with an influential voice in the war. It provided detailed live coverage and documented civilian casualties and the impact on the war (Hickey 2002). It also premiered exclusive footage of Osama bin Laden, a powerful competitor that the US media had to fear, and increasingly news organisations without access to first-hand accounts of the war turned to *Al Jazeera*, which gained worldwide notoriety (Seib, 2005).

At the same time, some have pointed out that the rise of this power is not entirely fair (Ayish, 2002). While *Al Jazeera* has worked hard to build an 'Arab public sphere' by giving a voice to as many people and ethnicities as possible. It is indeed the first Arab channel to allow Israelis to present their stories in Hebrew, English or Arabic. This was a major departure from past Arab media practices and a shock not only to the Arab public, but certainly to the Arab governing elite (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008). Some studies have shown that the Arab news media is more interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict than other issues (Ayish, 2002) Despite Israeli accusations of political bias against *Al Jazeera*, it is considered by many Israelis to be an important media force in the Arab world (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008).

4. Approaches to Public Diplomacy: Soft Power

RT is Russia's major multi-media and multilingual outside broadcaster, established in 2005 as Russia Today before changing its name to RT in 2009, whose news agenda aims to counter the 'information domination' of the mainstream Western media (Simonyan, 2013). In response to the Western media's accusations against Russia, RT chose to counter them directly, and chose to report on content that was ignored by the mainstream media in order to increase its international visibility. Intended as a way to promote Russia's soft power abroad, RT's focus shifted away from spreading traditional Russian culture and history, and RT quickly downplayed its direct ties to Russia. Its appearance as a tool of Russian public diplomacy and the ideological subject underpinning its agenda were linked in a direct way to the Russian political system's willingness to challenge US predominance in the global landscape (Yablokov, 2015). While RT portrayed how Russia was under attack, it sustained an identity of journalistic and national strength and resilience—a direct correlation to how Russia viewed its global role as a competitor to US hegemony (Chernobrov and Briant, 2020).

At the same time, the emergence of RT has led scholars to discover other uses for it. While creating a unique image of Russia, the conspiracy theories in the RT programme became a tool for Russian public diplomacy. Over

time, while exposing conspiracy theories about US government corruption and elite policies, it seemed to be a tool for undermining the image of the US in the world (Yablokov, 2015). RT challenged the elitist aspects of US politics and the show's hosts through the populist views emanating from its experts. Meanwhile, it offers an appreciation of the way in which these theories support the actions of the Russian authorities, helping the Russian leadership to be the "spokesperson" for the global "people" against the global "other". "The conspiracy narrative in RT's reporting and programming on Russia is an interpretive device for describing the risk of US domination of the world. US government officials, as well as both governmental and non-governmental organisations, are portrayed as essential elements of the worldwide control apparatus. A prime example is RT's reporting on the 2013/2014 conflict in Ukraine, where anti-American conspiracy narratives had a key role in interpreting Russia's actions. In RT's coverage of pro-EU demonstrations and protests, the violent atmosphere of the protests is often emphasized (Yablokov, 2015). In this way, discursive practices portray the protesters as associates of foreign powers and attempt to marginalise the protesters. RT's texts and photographs aim to position Viktor Yanukovich as a victim of the pro-EU demonstrations. One argument is that RT is a means of Russian soft power, an attempt to justify Russia and its allies in foreign affairs (SÖYLER, 2018).

5. Freedom of the Press: The Emergence of the Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere was first developed by Habermas, who saw the public sphere as a network of dialogue for debate (Garnham, 2007). It anticipates a society in which public affairs are discussed through the ability to engage in rational dialogue. In this ideal society, the authority of the powerful can be constrained by the weaker through the availability of communicative recourses and engagement in political argument and policy-making (Garnham, 2007). By abolishing media censorship through the dissolution of the Ministry of Information, *Al Jazeera* also enjoyed the first editorial independence of the media in the Arab world. In this way, *Al Jazeera* has responded well to the trend towards media liberalisation and its subsequent popularity among Arab audiences ((Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008). However, at the same time, no Arab government other than Qatar has been immune to *Al Jazeera*'s criticism, which has led to repeated discontent and even conflict in other Arab countries. For example, on the morning of 5 June 2017, five countries—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Yemen and Egypt—suddenly and simultaneously issued a 'diplomatic cut-off announcement' against Qatar, accusing the Qatari government of 'inciting terrorism' and interfering in the internal affairs of other countries through transnational media such as *Al Jazeera* "Al Jazeera was blocked in these countries (Ajaoud and Elmasry, 2020). But each time *Al Jazeera* was accused by other countries, Qatar insisted that the independence of *Al Jazeera*'s reporting could not be controlled by the government (Lage, 2005). Thinking in this sense, one could argue that *Al Jazeera* has brought about a profound, albeit potentially fragile and temporary, change in the Arab world. But it means that the Arab world is beginning to be relatively lenient towards critical voices, which is a good sign for the emergent global public sphere (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008).

The war in Iraq was an opportunity for the Arab media to go global, by participating in critical reporting with the West in the wider setting of global politics, especially of events in the Arab world. However, questions remain as to whether their practice marks a desire to exclude all views outside of the Arab world, and as can also be seen in the attitude of some Arab countries, there are limits to this freedom. Trying to achieve an idealised freedom of the press in such a political environment is almost impossible, as can also be seen in the diplomatic dilemma Qatar faced in 2017, in which *Al Jazeera* had to struggle to uphold freedom of the press under such conditions. Moreover, the rise of Arab media, with their progressively sceptical and negative attitude towards Western sourced information, has deepened the stereotype of Western media. Perhaps this is a proxy for the Arabs turning away from Western news and relying instead on the media they call their own. What is worrying is that they do not sometimes see their job as merely telling stories from an Arab perspective (Seib, 2005).

6. Orientalism: Correction or Mixture

Palestinian-American scholar Said explores cultural imperialism in the sense of cultural control and domination, introducing the concept of 'Orientalism'. He argues that behind the discursive weaving and shaping of the East by the West is "a relationship of power, a relationship of domination, a relationship of hegemony". He even argues that every European, regardless of his or her views, is ultimately almost a racist, an imperialist, an outright ethnocentrist (Said, 2004). RT is a good example of how this hegemonic, repressive Orientalist understanding has been corrected in the non-Western media. In its March 2014 report on the referendum on the status of Crimea, RT used the headline 'West furious as Crimea accepted into Russia', where the use of the subject 'West' implies a link to the 'Eastern bloc'. The use of the subject 'West' here implies a broad 'Western bloc' as opposed to an 'Eastern bloc'. This wording constitutes a dichotomy and a discourse that reinforces the enmity between East and West, which is reflected in the text as we feel towards them. The use of the verb 'anger' implies a negative orientation towards 'Western' policies (SÖYLER, 2018). This is also evident in the Chinese

media, where the Chinese government and media have made many efforts to break down various stereotypes of China based on the Orientalist West. The famous Chinese film director Zhang Yimou, who was in charge of preparing the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, took this issue into consideration and stressed that the Chinese cultural elements presented at the opening ceremony had to be easily understood by foreigners (Chen, 2007).

In this paper, we should also consider the fact that the apparent triumph of some Third World media may in fact be masking the actual triumph of a global order dominated by monopolistic states, particularly the US. Phoenix, for example, has stated that it aims to become the ‘CNN’ of the Chinese-speaking world, while *Al Jazeera* is usually described as the ‘CNN of Arabia’ (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008). So is this a corrective to orientalism or is it a hybrid? One example is TeleSur as TeleChavez, a Los Angeles-based alternative television network founded in Venezuela in 2005; it is sponsored by several Los Angeles governments as a ‘socialist response to CNN’. Like *Al Jazeera*, it is critical of US policies in Latin America; targeting the Latin American diaspora in the US (Di, 2012). Telesur can be defined as a ‘counter-hegemonic news outlet’, as it has a clear goal of directly attacking those BBC/CNN treatments of global events, and it also rejects the BBC/CNN approach to world events. It also rejects the assumptions of the BBC/CNN model’s “attachment to neutrality”, which it considers to be hypocritical in terms of balance and fairness. It has also been criticised by the US for the deep political polarisation under Chávez that has not only broken up Venezuela as a country, but also polarised academic research on the media in the country (Di, 2012).

7. Conclusion

An analysis of the phenomenon of the rise of local media from the above-mentioned perspectives shows that the emergence of third world media, which began to make their own voices heard, has indeed served as a counter-hegemonic press to a certain extent. The independent business and profitability model has also given them a certain degree of press freedom. But it is also important to note that the complexities of politics, economics and religious beliefs still severely limit its freedom and development. But the growth of local media is a trend. The days of the Western monopoly of hegemonic journalism are over.

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