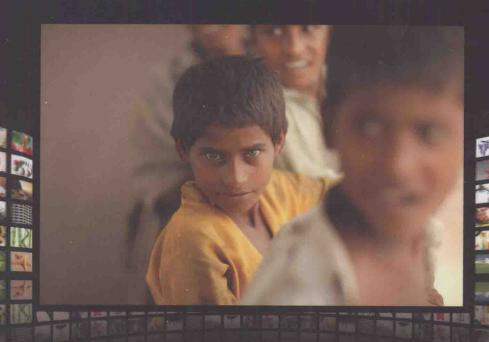
# Mediated Cosmopolitanism

THE WORLD OF TELEVISION NEWS

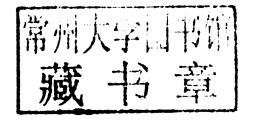


Alexa Robertson

## **Mediated Cosmopolitanism**

#### The World of Television News

#### **ALEXA ROBERTSON**



#### Copyright © Alexa Robertson 2010

The right of Alexa Robertson to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2010 by Polity Press

Polity Press 65 Bridge Street Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press 350 Main Street Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4947-4 ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4948-1 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Bembo by Servis Filmsetting Limited, Stockport, Cheshire. Printed and bound by MPG Books Group, UK

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.politybooks.com

### Preface

The world was watching when Barack Obama became US president in 2009. Aware that his inauguration was being followed live by over a billion viewers across the globe, Obama addressed not just Americans, but also the 'other peoples and governments' who were watching that day, 'from the grandest capitals' to the small village in Africa where his father was born. A political scientist sitting with her laptop in front of the television in one such capital (albeit only moderately grand) e-mailed a colleague in Washington and asked what it was like to be there at that moment. The political scientist in Washington replied that she was not in fact experiencing the inauguration with the crowds on the Mall a few blocks from her office, but in front of the television at home. Although they were an ocean and several time zones apart, it transpired that the women were taking part in the historic occasion in virtually the same space, and certainly at the same time.

It may have been unprecedented for the black son of an immigrant to become the president of the most powerful nation on earth, but there was nothing unusual about the experience of the two women. For quite a while, people separated by geography had been sharing events in real time, thanks to developments in communications that had become as ubiquitous as they were rapid.

Most people in the developed world, and many in less developed countries, had come a long way from the nineteenth-century breakfast table at which the man famously depicted by Anderson ([1983] 2006) underwent his ritual of reading the morning newspaper. Anderson's man would meet only a fraction of the other members of his nation, but when he read his paper he did so confident that his fellow citizens were doing the same. By virtue of such routine media consumption, the newspaper-reader had become part of a community of the imagination. It was a national community, and the image of this man is deployed by Anderson in an account of nationalism. A number of scholars, however, have intimated that the image might work when transposed onto a larger canvas.

Television has no borders, as regulators have found, at times to their chagrin; nor should it, in the view of the European Commission.<sup>1</sup> Audiences that have grown steadily in size and geographical scope since Anderson's man opened his paper have watched together as Princess Diana was mourned, as the Twin Towers fell, as people were swept away in the Asian tsunami, as Obama placed his hand on Lincoln's Bible, as Neda died on the streets of Tehran, and as legions of athletes and musicians competed in World Cup football matches and Eurovision song contests.

Such global mediated communion — be it on occasions of political gravitas or when Li Ning lit the Olympic cauldron in Beijing — is a central feature of the process which, according to Beck (2006), is making people cosmopolitans 'by default'. Beck's is a contested claim, and some are troubled by his insistence that it is possible to become a cosmopolitan without being aware of it. But the German sociologist shares with his critics an interest in conscious rather than unconscious or 'latent' forms of cosmopolitanism. Whether writing about the preconditions for cosmopolitan democracy, the emergence of a global public or the cultivation of a cosmopolitan awareness, such scholars maintain that, under globalization, citizens must be able, in ordinary ways, to form solidarities and connections with others who are distant (Stevenson 2003: 97).

This book is about the role that media actors can play in the making of such connections. Its point of departure is that television journalists are among the most powerful of societal sense-makers, and that the stories they tell about the world could help people relate to distant others or lead them to question whether those others *are* so distant after all. But it also explores the possibility that journalists rooted in different media cultures, or speaking to different audiences, may use the semiotic materials circulating in the global mediascape in different ways.

While concerned specifically with the role of the media – or, to be precise, television news – the underlying aim of the book is nevertheless to contribute to the larger scholarly discussion of cosmopolitanism. That discussion has a number of weaknesses.

First, scholars from different fields have had a tendency to talk past each other and often fail to engage with the insights of colleagues who are asking similar questions from different disciplinary vantage points. As Hannerz (2004a, 2005) puts it, there is a 'fault line' between political and cultural understandings of the term, and regrettable blind spots have been the result.

Second, the most significant contributions to the study of cosmopolitanism have, on balance, been theoretical. The empirical work that *has* been done is seldom substantial and – in an age when we are inundated by a plethora of media messages – has been based largely on anecdotal evidence which focuses on distant suffering and conflict.

Third, claims about the preconditions for the development of cosmopolitan consciousness are routinely couched in general terms. Little attention has been paid to how they may vary from one country or culture to another.

While not pretending to overcome such problems, an effort has been made here to avoid compounding them. The focus of the book is on news stories that have both a political and a cultural register, and it thus attempts to integrate insights from both political and cultural conceptions of cosmopolitanism. The study presented in the following pages engages with the substantial literature on cosmopolitanism and other theoretical realms pertinent to the inquiry, but it approaches that literature through an unusual empirical portal.

Scholarship in this field tends to have to do with global issues and a myriad of actors, so it is for good reason that it often takes a bird's-eye view. But the work of imagination does not allow itself xii Preface

to be studied from such a vantage point, at least not empirically. It must be seen close up, and the voices of individual workers of the imagination, and the fruits of their labour, must be made discernible and placed in a meaningful context. For this to be possible, the scope must be radically narrowed. This book focuses on just two sorts of imagination workers – journalists and the people for whom they make news reports – and most of all the stories that are evidence of that imagining. At the same time, the focus is radically expanded in comparison with most other empirical studies of cosmopolitanism, as the insights contributed here are based on the analysis of over 2,000 news reports broadcast on eight different channels, some targeting national and others global audiences. The quantitative analysis of superficial features of those news items has been combined with closer readings of the narrative traits of representative stories.

The book's main thesis is that, if we are to understand how media actors may help make the connections that underpin a cosmopolitan outlook, we must be attentive to evidence that not all do. The point is not that media globalization is a myth, as Hafez (2007) has admittedly good reasons for arguing, but that it is an empirical question. Rather than assuming that global broadcasters are those most liable to foster cosmopolitan ways of seeing and empathizing, we should entertain the possibility that broadcasters targeting national audiences in their safe front rooms (or wherever the screen in current use is situated) might be just as inclined to address their viewers as members of a larger community, or to ask them to imagine such allegiance. If this possibility is to be recognized and explored, it is not enough to look at what is being reported; we should also examine the narrative techniques involved in telling such stories.

The news stories in focus here were broadcast on television. Their selection begs a number of difficult questions. What is television today? And how are the people who use it to be conceived of – as citizens or media consumers; as members of the public or of the audience; or as producers of media texts in their own right?<sup>2</sup> When the Berlin Wall toppled and media globalization was taking off, television was central to the directive governing media policy in Europe. Two decades later, *Television Without Frontiers* was

Preface xiii

upgraded and became the *Audiovisual Media Services Directive*. The challenge identified by policy-makers was no longer to regulate media production and distribution in an age when satellite broadcasting was demonstrating the porousness of national borders. It was now to retain some degree of control over a mediascape in which 6,500 channels and a host of other digital outlets had become available to Europeans, who could now decide what they wanted to see and when they wanted to see it (Robertson 2010).<sup>3</sup>

While the technological and economic developments reflected in such policy changes are by no means insignificant, the media actors in focus in this book are nevertheless television journalists working for 'traditional' public service broadcasters, targeting national audiences, and mainstream global broadcasters whose moorings are in the public service tradition, even though they rely, to varying degrees, on commercial revenues.4 They represent continuity, in that most have been operating for decades (and, in the case of the national broadcasters, date back to the days when their viewers had only one channel to watch). But they also represent change, as they have had to adapt to radically altered technological, economic and political circumstances. Ongoing transformations in the media landscape notwithstanding, actors such as these broadcasters continue to play a central role in the sort of processes dealt with here. In times of turbulence and transformation, people continue to turn to familiar faces and voices for interpretation and reassurance.<sup>5</sup> This, at least, is the point of departure for what follows. That most of the channels are based in Northern Europe can be seen as a limitation on the scope of the inquiry. On the other hand, the political and media cultures in which they are based vary in interesting ways, and, while the sample admittedly, and unavoidably, excludes a good part of the world's media cultures, it is nevertheless an antidote to the predominance of studies of Anglo-American media.

The red thread throughout the book is the interplay between three key notions – cosmopolitanism, imagination and narrative – and their relationship to the world portrayed in television news. Chapter 1 introduces them more thoroughly, by reviewing scholarship relevant to each notion and to the study as a whole. Chapter 2 looks at everyday reporting over a period of six weeks in three

xiv Preface

national and three global channels and examines the narrative techniques that may bring the world closer or keep it at arm's length. In so doing, it explores the role of journalists in the spatial dimension of cosmopolitanization. Chapter 3 takes a closer look at one of the news cultures featured in the preceding chapter, and more specifically at the relationship between the people who report the world, the people for whom the world is reported, and the reports themselves. Chapter 4 contrasts the everyday or 'banal' understandings that were in focus in earlier chapters with news coverage in the ten days following the Asian tsunami, when 'unconscious' or latent cosmopolitanism (following Beck's train of thought) became conscious or active and gave rise, at least momentarily, to a global public. Chapter 5 asks whether cosmopolitanism, and the sort of news narratives that may have a bearing on it, could have a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. It reflects on the finding that history is often invoked when narrating the world of today, and in particular examines its symbolic role in live coverage of the anniversary of a bygone war. Chapter 6 pulls together the threads unravelled in the first five chapters and ends with a question: If we are to make connections with people elsewhere, what should be expected of journalism in the global era?

It is, of course, not only scholars who are concerned about the power of communication and the political work of the imagination. Governmental and non-governmental actors all operate on this wavelength, and it has been said that the contest to control imagery in a global setting is the predominant political struggle of our time. Journalists are also keenly aware of the responsibility that rests on their shoulders (or in their viewfinders, or in the hand that holds the microphone or hovers over the keyboard). The evidence of this is abundant and can be found in programme policy documents, trade publications, training handbooks, interview material and trailers for the channels' own programmes. In one of these, broadcast shortly after operations began in the autumn of 2006, a British journalist working for Al Jazeera English encapsulated the challenge: 'You have to report the world from many different perspectives in order to report the world back to itself.' The question that serves as the leitmotif of the book is: How is that work best done?

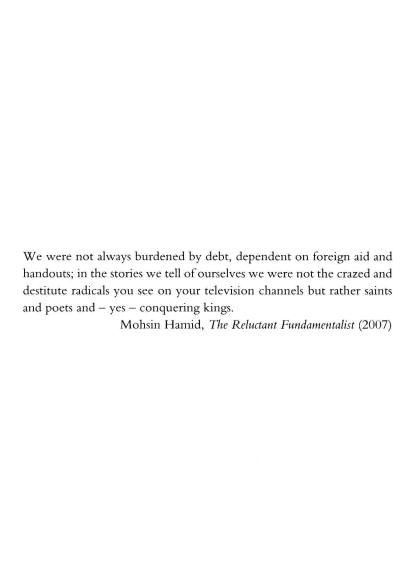
### Acknowledgements

Ulf Hannerz is a major presence in these pages, and not only because of his theoretical contributions to the study of cosmopolitanism or his initiative in putting together a project team to explore its empirical foundations. Had he not encouraged me, one dark December day, to stick to my idea of presenting my work in the form it takes here, it would have remained a collection of scattered articles and conference papers, obscure to all but the most determined googler. He was also the first reader of the manuscript, which benefited from his comments. Annika Björkdahl, Lilie Chouliaraki, Martin Hall, Maria Hellman, Annabel Herzog, Frank Möller and Kristina Riegert read various parts of the text fragments that preceded that draft; apart from their feedback, their interest in this research was invigorating. The intellectual stimulation and moral support provided by Alexandra Segerberg and Nina Burge, culturally competent political scientists, was more important than they can imagine. I appreciate the time taken and openness shown by the journalists, farmers, librarians, musicians, construction and factory workers and pensioners whose stories form the foundation of chapter 3, which is based on an article previously published in the Swedish Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift. A vote of thanks is due Minna Frydén, Alexandra Martin, Spela Mezik, Helena Onn,

Veronica Persson, Carly Sawyers and Jasmine Tournaj for their patient and altruistic assistance in coding the material reported in chapter 4. The intellectual resources on offer in the classroom are often underestimated and, unbeknown to them, my students at the Department of Political Science at Stockholm University have contributed to this study with their curiosity and enthusiasm. The two wise but anonymous reviewers who read the entire manuscript provided suggestions that not only improved the book but were also a pleasure to follow up on. I am also grateful to Caroline Richmond for her attention to detail, as well as Andrea Drugan at Polity Press for fielding a manuscript that landed, without warning, on her desk late one Friday afternoon, and for providing prompt and encouraging feedback in the months that followed.

Watching television for a living is not always as much fun as one would think, and watching as much as I have was only possible thanks to grants from the Swedish Research Council and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (including an additional grant that made it possible to reproduce the images in plates 1.1, 2.1, 2.3, 2.5 and 5.1, courtesy of BBC News, and plates 2.2, 2.4, 5.2 and 5.3, courtesy of SVT); the support of Claes Linde and Anncristin Länta; the cheerful technical assistance of June Head, Ulrike Klingemann, Michael Lundin and Roland Fredriksson; and, most of all, the wizardry of Bernard Devine, who is the Dumbledore of the Stockholm University Media Library.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my children, Nick and Clarie, for agreeing to share their bedrooms with VCRs and computers that digitize broadcasts day and night, and my husband Claes Åkesson, who struggles valiantly to get the family to pay attention to the news that is unfolding *today*, and not just the old news in the Media Library. It is also largely thanks to Claes that Nick and Clarie are growing up to be cosmopolitans of the actually travelling variety and not just mediascapers. This book is for them.



### Contents

Lı.	st of illustrations	V1
Preface		ix
A	Acknowledgements	
1	Introduction: Nourishing the Cosmopolitan	
	Imagination	1
2	Reporting the World Back to Itself: Comparing	
	News Coverage to Domestic and Global Publics	30
3	The Woman with the Samsonite Suitcase: Journalists,	
	Viewers, and Imagining How it is to be the Other	50
4	A Wave of Cosmopolitan Sentiment: Television	
	Coverage of the Asian Tsunami	76
5	Old Wars in News Programmes: Cosmopolitanism,	
	Media and Memory	104
6	Brushing away the Flies: Concluding Thoughts	137
No	otes	150
Re	References and Bibliography	
Index		173

# List of illustrations

#### Tables

Table 2.1	Material on which chapter 2 is based	34
Table 3.1	Distribution of reports about Europe in SVT's	
	Rapport	58
Table 3.2	The different sorts of people interviewed in	
	SVT's Rapport news items about Europe	59
Table 4.1	The distribution of news items pertaining to	
	the tsunami catastrophe in the main evening	
	news programmes of eight broadcasters	86
Table 4.2	Percentage of all items in which a given country	
	is the focus of a news item about the tsunami	89
Table 4.3	Percentage of tsunami reports on each channel	
	in the sample in which a given problem/	
	problem category is identified	91
Table 4.4	Responsibility for solving the problems depicted	
	in tsunami reports	93
Table 4.5	Percentage of tsunami reports in each channel	
	in which a given actor/type of actor is	
	mentioned as a source of assistance	95

	List of illustrations	vii
Table 4.6 Table 5.1	Distribution of actors Distribution of items mentioning the	98
	anniversary of D-Day in the main evening	
	news programmes of six broadcasters	110
	Figures	
Figure 2.1	Distribution of news in the 285 broadcasts,	
	seen in terms of spatial location	39
Figure 4.1	The proportion of broadcasts devoted to news	
	about the tsunami	87
	Plates	
Plate 1.1	A Sudanese fighter seen in close-up, yet cut off	
	from the viewer, and without a mouth to engage	
	the viewer in dialogue	29
Plate 2.1	The pedagogical BBC reporter teaches viewers	
	about 'forgotten wars'	36
Plate 2.2	East meets West on Swedish Television's Rapport	
	as the Kuscer family leave the old bloc and meet	
DI . 2.2	their Italian friends in the new Europe	42
Plate 2.3 Plate 2.4	India on the eve of the election	44
riate 2.4	Kiran Misra talks about developments in the Indian economy, as well as their impact on the	
	lives of the Indian middle class	46
Plate 2.5	The 'realist' BBC narrator positions himself	70
2.0	between the viewer and distant others	48
Plate 5.1	The BBC's Charles Wheeler on the beach at	
	Normandy	112

Karl Mass during an interview in a Normandy

Mary Crofton talking about her part in D-Day

The fallen support a new generation

119

120

127

Plate 5.2

Plate 5.3

Plate 5.4

cemetery

Plate 5.5	Symbolizing French-German relations in	
	wartime	128
Plate 5.6	Symbolizing French-German relations in	
	peacetime	129
Plate 5.7	EuroNews urges viewers to remember historical	
	atrocities and reflect on how reconciliation has	
	become possible	135
Plate 6.1	A starving child with flies on her face	138

# Introduction: Nourishing the Cosmopolitan Imagination

Over half a century ago, Kenneth Boulding suggested that, to understand international relations, it was essential to realize that people respond not to the objective facts of the situation, but to their image of it. 'It is what we think the world is like,' he wrote, 'not what it is really like, that determines our behavior' (Boulding 1959: 120). Central to such responses was the national image, which in his account extended through time, 'backward into a supposedly recorded or perhaps mythological past and forward into an imagined future'. Boulding thought the consciousness of shared events and experiences, of having gone through something together, was of the utmost importance in forming such collective images. But he also thought they could be developed or, as he put it, sophisticated.

It is akin almost to a Copernican revolution: the unsophisticated image sees the world only from the viewpoint of the viewer; the sophisticated image sees the world from many imagined viewpoints, as a system in which the viewer is only a part. The child sees everything through his own eyes and refers to his own immediate comfort. The adult learns to see the world through the eyes of others; his horizon extends to other times, places and cultures than his own. (Boulding 1959: 130)