

Adrian Athique

Indian

MEDIA



Indian Media

Global Approaches

ADRIAN ATHIQUE



polity

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Global Media and Communication

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Introduction: A Global Approach to the Indian Media

The mass media in India represent one of the most complex fields of communication to be found anywhere in the world. This proves to be the case whether we trace this web of relationships via its technical infrastructures, its commercial organization or through the cultural formations arising from its huge and diverse audiences. As such, the most striking feature of India's media system, when viewed from an exterior perspective, is its vast size and complexity. Scale, therefore, naturally provides an overarching context to our approach. Within that context, there is sufficient depth and breadth along more or less any line of analysis for meaningful complexities to be observed and, with the necessary resources, recorded. There is not scope, however, in any one overview of the topic to capture the field at such a fine grain. Rather, it is my intention here to provide a useful introduction to the field of the Indian media, and to point towards a greater depth of information available in the present literature for those seeking to pursue particular pathways into the topic. My focus on the global also implicitly frames an international readership. For that reason, I aim to provide a skeleton of general knowledge on India that will contextualize some of the arguments presented on the operation of the Indian media. A good measure of this information may be well known to those who have first-hand knowledge of the subject matter, but I would hope those readers might appreciate the benefit of assessing a more explicitly international perspective on some of the critical debates taking place around the media in India today.

In that sense, it is notable that the primary framework for understanding the Indian media over many decades has been a national one. It is equally significant that a large part of this work has been carried out by Indian scholars over the last half of the twentieth century, and that the national story of the Indian media remains, by its very nature, a work in progress. By comparison, it is only in the twenty-first century that the 'international' academy has begun to pay serious attention to the Indian media, and a sustained demand has emerged for their inclusion in wide-ranging comparative accounts of global communication. There are a number of reasons for this shift that can be variously attributed to the commercial, political and intellectual domains. To a significant extent, the newfound interest in the Indian media reflects an era in which foreign investors began to see opportunities for investment

in India, not least in the media. As economic growth accelerated in India, and the geopolitics of the world entered a new period of change, the political status of India as a global power has also become more widely recognized. For academics outside of India, it was in this climate that the long process of unwinding the eurocentricism of the social sciences finally began to make headway. There has, accordingly, been a rapid rise in the breadth and scale of publishing on the subject. Much of this work is still being undertaken by Indian scholars, both at home and in the West, but with a growing range of contributions being made from others around the world.

It could be said that the Indian media has become a newly fashionable field of interest in the contemporary 'Western' world. There is more, however, than changing perceptions at play. The media industries in India – from television to telecoms, from cinema to software, from radio to Internet – have themselves all undergone rapid change in this period. Arguably, this has been due to their relative position within a matrix of what could currently be considered the paramount concerns of sociological analysis:

- (a) the transformative potential of new media technologies;
- (b) the reordering of capital markets (and thus power) due to the implementation of such technologies;
- (c) developments in patterns of human activity (including employment and migration); and
- (d) shifts in the modes of cultural 'belonging' which can be conceived of within such a powerfully reterritorialized human sphere.

This familiar matrix has commonly been identified as the process of globalization, articulating as eternally new what Arjun Appadurai has called 'modernity at large' (1996). It remains contestable, however, to what extent we can see this phenomenon as emerging out of any single causal origin. Hence, we should be wary of reading from (a) to (d) in a lateral fashion. Not one of them is a singular determinant that can explain all of the others. Rather, it is better to understand these various components as operating within a convergent and overlapping matrix of social change.

A global approach to the Indian media necessitates an emphasis on the contiguity between those actions and the operation of an international media field. As such, we must be attentive to the dialogue conducted with the global inside of India, as well as to the influence of Indian media out in the world at large. In order to do so effectively, I will attempt to outline the case at various points for the distinctive nature of the Indian media as well as for their broad alignment with wider global trends in communications. Given the scale at which this discussion must be conducted, the dominant model of globalization will provide us with an overarching framework for characterizing the

broader trends within this vast field of interactions. In that sense, what is true of the study of Indian media at the national level is also true to our approach to the largest and most ambitious object of academic analysis, our world itself. In order to undertake this 'global' approach to the Indian media, we must juxtapose models of globalization with some of the existing approaches for understanding mass communications in India. We can then compare, in broad strokes, the vast with the totality.

Technology, Scale and Distance

One of the foundational claims in support of the proposition that the modern world is unlike its predecessors is made in light of the technical capacity to collapse time and distance within a world-spanning technical apparatus. This infrastructure of machineries designed to overcome the tyranny of distance includes tangible systems of transport such as shipping, aircraft and high-speed motorized land vehicles. Just as significantly, it also includes mechanized carriers of information such as recorded works, telegraphy, broadcasting and digital information exchanges. It was the Canadian scholar Harold Innis who advanced the notion that the technical infrastructures and communicative forms of mass media were fundamentally space-binding and time-binding (1951, 1952). That is, they work to standardize spatial perception, master distance and regulate the human experience of time within their sphere of operation. Marshall McLuhan, following Innis, famously postulated in the 1960s that the mass media represented technological extensions of the human sensory system, the existence of which fundamentally altered human consciousness (1964). McLuhan also posited the notion that the advent of the electronic media had brought into being a 'global village', where each and every part of the world became interconnected by 'information highways' of mass communication (1962, 1968). For McLuhan, living in this densely connected global society, and experiencing it through new mediums like television, would inevitably transform human subjectivity.

McLuhan also claimed that the electronic media would forge a direct link with traditional 'oral' cultures, allowing 'developing' societies to leapfrog the age of print into the new electronic age. Thus, in many respects, his arguments align closely with the views of Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm and others on the potentials of media systems as an accelerator of modernity in 'traditional' societies (Lerner 1958; Schramm 1964). Generally taken as the iconic account of technological determinism in media studies, McLuhan's emphasis on the effects of media technologies over and above their content

is consistent with a modernist conception of mechanized progress (Williams 1974). Developed with television in mind, these ideas have been periodically applied to subsequent media technologies, particularly the networked digital information systems of the present era (Levinson 1999). Thus, the propositions of both Innis and McLuhan are in accordance with Anthony Giddens's more contemporary characterization of the technical impetus of globalization, where he notes that: 'Instantaneous electronic communication isn't just a way in which news of information is conveyed more quickly. Its existence alters the very texture of our lives' (2002: 11). Arjun Appadurai, similarly, subscribes to the view that 'electronic mediation transforms pre-existing worlds of communication and conduct' (1996: 3). For Manuel Castells, it is the rise of information technology, and global computer networking in particular, that underpins his theoretical formulation of globalization in the form of a network society (1996).

The notion of a technological catalyst for a globalized state of mind is highly significant to the Indian case – not least since the most critical developments in modern media technologies have been deployed in the subcontinent at more or less the same time that they have been deployed in industrialized societies. In India, the introduction of railways, cinema, telegraphy and broadcasting was contemporaneous with their introduction in the dominant Western world which, following the logic of McLuhan, infers a more or less instant transfer of technological change across the world, with all its attendant effects. In that sense, the technological force of globalization in India should be readily evidenced by the manner in which a nation already densely interlinked to the rest of the world by land and sea came to reposition itself in a world increasingly defined, in the first place, by print and photography and, subsequently, by moving images and data transfers. It is equally important to note that India has not only been a receiver of imported and fully formed technologies. Significant Indian contributions have been made in such fields as satellite broadcasting and computing. At the same time, the human density of India is fundamentally different from the Canadian example that informed Innis and McLuhan. In India, the sheer scale of population adds a further dimension to the process of spanning great physical distances. The capacity to bind together a billion human beings within any system of mass communication raises considerably more technological challenges than crossing ten thousand miles of terrain. For this reason, the process of technological development remains markedly uneven, with hundreds of millions of people fully integrated into half-a-dozen media systems, and hundreds of millions of others remaining largely untouched at the level of daily experience. Nonetheless, the articulation of globalization via a technological paradigm provides a useful rationale for our understanding of the modern era in

which India has been brought ever closer to the wider world through increasing volumes of communication. However, this is a process that we need to understand as ongoing and not without its attendant conflicts and anxieties for reasons that necessarily escape the functions of engineering skill.

The Economic Structures of Media

While globalization is typically seen as a set of processes enabled in the first place by technology, much of the subsequent discussion has turned upon the transformation wrought by those processes upon the economic sphere. The most obvious manifestations of those changes are the increasing speed, frequency and volume of international transactions. In a more interconnected world, instantaneous communications speed up the actions of international trade to unprecedented levels. There is no doubt that the automation of commercial processes via digital technologies has provided the impetus for an upsurge in the field of global transactions over the past twenty years. Nonetheless, it is also useful to break down the overall body of transactions into different fields of activity. A proportion of them contribute to increasing volumes of trade in commodities between nations in ways that correspond to traditional understandings of international trade. Probably the most significant change in this arena has been the steady growth in the trade of intangible goods such as information, entertainment and services over and above the trade in tangible, physical goods (Coyle 1999; Leadbeater 2000). Another field of activity can be related to the capacity of communicative efficiency to establish new organizational processes that enable more complex relations of production across various international terrains. It is media technologies that facilitate the growth of more explicitly international business organizations (Castells 1996). Finally, the largest contributor to the overall volume of international transactions is the growth of financial flows seeking profit in their rapid movements between different currencies, commodities and markets (Soros 2002; Das 2004).

The role of the media within this broad field of transactions is complex. This is precisely because media technologies are, at one level, the enabling technologies for much of this activity. At another level, however, media content must also be counted as a tradable commodity in its own right. In addition, the term 'media' also encompasses the ownership and operation of institutions that provide information and entertainment services, whether commercially or on the behalf of national taxpayers. Thus, when we seek to outline the phenomenon of globalization within the media industries we are drawn to three major avenues of enquiry. First, we need to consider the

role of media technologies and industries within wider economic processes (Albarran 2009; Castells 1996, 2009). Second, we need to examine both the volumes and the nature of the trade in media content around the world (Moran 2009; Thussu 2007a). Third, we are inclined to look for evidence of patterns of ownership within media institutions that either transcend national boundaries or which, regardless of their institutional origins, seek to cater to or even dominate a wide range of national markets in their operations (Flew 2007). Thus, within the diverse operations of the mass media, trends towards globalization can be evidenced in a number of different ways. Establishing a critical role for media technologies that favours international business relationships provides one set of evidence for *globalization through media*. Identifying a growing volume of international trade in media content points to the ongoing *globalization of media markets*. Finally, assessing the internationalization of capital ownership in the media business provides evidence of an emerging *global media apparatus*.

In the course of this book, I will seek to question the extent of the globalization process at work in the Indian media through all of these dimensions. The 'globalization through media' thesis directs us towards the rise of the Southern Indian city of Bangalore as a major concentration of activity oriented towards the global information technology industry (Aoyama 2003; Parthasarathy 2004). Information technologies in the form of computing applications and telecommunications are also critical to the emergence of a new industry within India over the recent past, that of providing business processing to foreign organizations (Dossani and Kenney 2009; Nadeem 2011). The expansion of India's advertising industry is also a domain in which we can see the extension of the mediasphere as serving the interests of a wider economy of consumption (Mazarella 2003). The 'globalization of media markets' thesis will direct us towards an assessment of the media flows in and out of India, where the formats of cinema and television come under particular scrutiny in terms of both the national/international origins of their content and the specific trajectories of import and export that 'stitch' India into the wider audiovisual field of globalization (Thussu 2007a; Ranganathan and Rodrigues 2010). In the last category of 'an emerging global media apparatus', we will look towards the changing patterns of ownership as well as the overall political economy of the Indian media industries (Athique 2009; Thomas 2010). This constitutes a broad theme that will be relevant across this book as a whole, as we seek to understand the complex ways in which mass communications in India have gone through distinctive periods of integration and disengagement with international investors, while also being subject to shifting policy orientations towards nationalization and liberalization within India itself.

In that sense, we should note from the outset that the seismic changes in the media over the past two decades have been consciously oriented towards private investment. They have been somewhat more cautiously oriented towards global integration, facilitated by the incremental repeal of regulations previously designed to prevent this very process from occurring. Thus, the globalization of media ownership continues to be a contested process for reasons that have been constituted historically in the Indian experience. At the same time, the importation of economic models, ideologies and organizational paradigms from around the world has been welcomed over a much longer period than the present phase of globalization, and this is also a facet of globalization that warrants some analysis. Finally, despite the obvious primacy of the global connectivity of the Indian media to our present concern, we should also note that the tripartite processes of technical enablement, cosmopolitan markets and the institutional integration of capital are at least as relevant for understanding the nature of the domestic media economy in India. In that sense, globalization has also been happening within India for a long time, and this necessarily inflects the nature of its engagement with the exterior manifestation of comparable forces.

The Cultural Dimensions of Media

The nexus between technology and finance provides us with a set of quantifiable structures by which we can assess the increasing integration between different parts of the world. They cannot by themselves, however, recount the full story of globalization, since the wholeness of the world is not only constituted by geographical distance and the distribution of resources. That is why, in making the claim that our daily experience of living in the world is undergoing radical transformation, globalization theories all attempt to link this pattern of technological connections and economic transactions with the shifting conduct of human beings. In doing so, they begin with the more or less explicit observation that human society is discontinuous and variable in its manifest forms. This is primarily evidenced in the phrase 'cultural diversity', which encapsulates the notion that human differences operate at the level of language, spiritual belief systems, socializing rituals, kinship structures, moral regulation, cultural performance and formal political organization (UNESCO 2001). With the important exception of the latter, these factors are all seen as contributing towards a sense of collective identity expressed through the notion of ethnicity. The rise of this concept during the last century marks a critical shift from understanding human differences in terms of innate racial characteristics towards a more diffuse anthropology

where the reproduction of various forms of social knowledge are perceived as the major constituent in the human geography of the world.

Since ethnic social knowledge is seen as being both expressed and transmitted through an overlapping set of culturally distinct processes, there is a further implicit assumption that the present form of human difference is determined by the stability of communication. This is because established forms and patterns of social communication, along with the performative traditions of classical and popular culture, are seen as essential components of ethnic socialization (Smith 1999). As such, mass media technologies are inevitably seen as having a profound effect upon the existing order of cultural diversity. While proponents of mass communication in the developing world initially saw the overturning of traditional social orders as a necessary step in fostering scientific modernity and social progress, its critics saw the danger of cultural obliteration due to the primacy of the United States in the production of media content. By this logic, the social mores intrinsic to American film and television programming would ultimately overwrite local cultures and, over time, enforce the 'global homogenization' of culture in its own image (Schiller 1976; Tomlinson 1991). It was this defensive reading of global media flows that justified both widespread restrictions on media imports and the increasing regulatory authority of nation-states over cultural production throughout the twentieth century.

However, the notion of a strong model of media 'effects', where audiences are culturally reprogrammed by foreign ideas, has also been heavily contested. In the first phase of critique, scholars set out to demonstrate that media consumers were heavily differentiated in their responses to media content, primarily due to their own particular social circumstances (Morley 1980). For this reason, people tended to read media content in ways that made sense to them, rejecting messages that challenged their established subjective positions (Hall 1980). In the second phase of critique, the widespread acceptance of the notion that audiences were 'active' rather than 'passive' readers of content was given an international, comparative dimension which sought to record the varying ways in which audiences with different cultural identities read the same media content (Ang 1985; Liebes and Katz 1990). More fundamentally, it was noted that the very idea that the mediated projection of American culture could overwrite, say, French identity was based upon the twin assumptions that the inhabitants of those countries were themselves culturally homogeneous and that this homogeneity could be readily encapsulated via a media format (Higson 2000; Schlesinger 2000).

As media scholars became more attentive to cultural diversity – not just between, but also within, national populations – the third phase of critique sought to emphasize the inherently cosmopolitan field of popular culture

in the new era of globalization that emerged at the beginning of the 1990s. The mobility of culture, through the movements of people and of media products, was seen to exemplify a new multicultural reality where all parts of the world were in constant contact (Appadurai 1996). Roland Robertson challenged the 'Americanization' thesis, using the example of the Japanese engagement with American popular culture. Robertson argued that people generally encountered foreign culture on their own terms and in their own social domain, and subsequently reworked it from an indigenous perspective, producing a hybrid product that interlaced the global with the local, leading to 'glocalization' (1994). The logical outcome of the broad-scale operation of this process was not global homogenization through an American form, but rather an acceleration in cultural-mixing, giving rise to a global 'melange' of interrelated cultures (Nederveen Pieterse 1995).

In the past decade, there has also been a growing recognition of other media exporters who contribute to the field of globalization. In recognition of the 'increasing volume and velocity of multi-directional media flows that emanate from particular cities, such as Bombay, Cairo and Hong Kong', Michael Curtin has proposed that we think of the global media not as an imperial force based in the West operating upon the rest of the world, but as a more complex matrix linking media capitals around the globe (2003: 202). This has led to the reformulation of the cultural force of globalization, following the premise that media audiences and industries inhabit a world where cultural exchange is notably uneven, but is nonetheless multi-polar and diffuse. Thus, from this perspective:

It is simplistic to imagine an active First World simply forcing its products on a passive Third world . . . global mass culture does not so much replace local culture as coexist with it, providing a cultural lingua franca . . . the imported mass culture can also be indigenised, put to local use, given a local accent . . . there are powerful reverse currents as a number of Third World countries (Mexico, Brazil, India, Egypt) dominate their own markets and even become cultural exporters. (Shohat and Stam 1996: 149)

The Indian media emerges as a crucial point of reference within this debate because the film industry in particular has achieved a significant global presence over the course of many decades. It does not command the revenues of Hollywood, but nonetheless reaches audiences across large swathes of the developing world. Thus, the popular Indian film is often posited as the exemplar of the 'contra-flows' of media content that offset the dominance of Western media content (Thussu 2007a).

Establishing the cultural evidence for globalization in India necessarily raises broader and more subjective lines of enquiry than the technological

and economic dimensions. The 'cultural imperialism' thesis retains currency, and the arrival of large volumes of Western programming over the past two decades still raises the spectre of foreign cultural influence as a symptom of globalization. As such, we must be attentive to the traces of 'Westernization' upon Indian society as exerted by media content. Simultaneously, we are also required to seek countervailing evidence of the extent to which Indian society is able to 'indigenize' Western media formats and imprint its own media productions with a distinctively Indian cultural form. As a 'contra-flow' of media content, we must also consider the cultural input of Indian media into the field of globalization. In doing all of this, however, we must keep in mind the cultural diversity of India. If it has become apparent that neither the United States nor France has a singular cultural identity when subjected to close examination, the cultural diversity of India is apparent even from the most cursory glance. All of the constituent components of an Indian 'ethnic' culture are inherently pluralized, be that language, faith, ritual, kinship, morality or performance. In that sense, we must be equally attentive to the interplay between homogenization and diversity and between hybridity and authenticity within Indian society. The cultural dimensions of globalization, from an Indian perspective, are thus very much more complicated than the general theoretical account provides for. Nonetheless, where they are absolutely in accordance is in the inherent politicization of culture in our contemporary worldview.

Historical and Neological Frameworks

Most contemporary accounts of the Indian encounter with globalization take their mark from the watershed year of 1991, when the collapse of the Soviet Bloc produced a seismic shift in international relations. In that same year, the Indian government announced its intention to follow a path of economic liberalization and, for those interested in the highly significant role of the media in this new era, this was also the year that international satellite broadcasting began transmitting over and above the old terrestrial state broadcast system. In that sense, globalization in India has generally been given a definite periodization. There is, however, a contention amongst scholars whether globalization represents a radically new set of social conditions or whether it is an extension of longer-term historical processes. In this respect, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam choose to emphasize the continuity between theories of globalization and earlier theories of modernization, seeing both as rooted in the diffusionist model of the 'imperial imaginary' of the colonial world (1996). By contrast, Arjun Appadurai argues that modernity has broken the confines

of a centre-periphery model of transmission and become 'decisively at large' (1996: 3). Appadurai emphatically locates this radical transformation in the recent past, asserting that 'it is only in the past two decades or so that media and migration have become so massively globalized, that is to say, active across large and irregular transnational terrains' (1996: 9).

Appadurai therefore presents 'a theory of rupture that takes media and migration as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics', going as far as to suggest that a 'mobile and unforeseeable relationship between mass-mediated events and migratory audiences defines the core of the link between globalization and the modern' (1996: 3–4). Accordingly, Appadurai puts the electronic visual media at the heart of globalization, locating transnational media practices as both catalyst and primary evidence of a changing world. It is certainly the case that both of these phenomena have become increasingly significant for the upper middle classes of the Indian subcontinent during this period. The migration of South Asians to the West has expanded its intake well beyond the traditional elite. There are important and identifiable linkages between those patterns of migration and the dissemination of Indian media content. The expansion of the Indian domestic media environment in the past two decades articulates a cultural milieu that is entirely new to postcolonial generations, and it far outstrips the reach of previous periods of expansion during the colonial era. Similarly, the increasing internationalization of business has symbolically overturned five decades of substantially self-contained nationalist economics. Thus, for many Indians, globalization does appear to constitute an entirely new social experience, one that naturally supports the neological reading of globalization.

Taking the alternative view, Antony Hopkins, amongst others, has described the contemporary convergence of media technologies, international finance capital, geopolitics and cultural interchange as simply a continuation of related processes at play over several centuries (Hopkins 2002). From this perspective, it is argued that all of these contributing factors may have increased in sophistication over time, becoming ever more prolific and significant at a global scale, but this is primarily an increase in scale rather than a 'moment of rupture'. As such, it is argued that trade in the colonial world was also dominated by global corporations and international transactions. The British East India Company, which progressively took over the Indian subcontinent during the eighteenth century, is an iconic example of this process. Similarly, the media-migration nexus has some precedents. *The Times* of London was influential in the fostering of a transnational imaginary amongst the globally dispersed functionaries and subjects of Empire in the nineteenth century. Benedict Anderson's well-known historical research has sought to demonstrate how the spread of print media transformed the social

imagination of the various peoples of South East Asia during the nineteenth century, recasting their social referents through the force of global comparisons (1991, 1998). From the historical view, therefore, the world may be more globalized now than it was thirty years ago, but the component forces of globalization have been equally strong in other epochs.

In this work, I will seek to balance these two opposing views. For the most part, I will focus on the here-and-now of the Indian media in terms of their contemporary engagement with the global. I do so in recognition that the primary concern of global media analysis is to understand the complex forces of social change in the present. However, I also firmly believe that if we are to understand the distinctive nature of the Indian media in a manner that is amenable to international comparison, we need to consider two previous phases of globalization during which the mass media played a highly significant role in articulating India's relationship with the wider world. I will therefore devote a chapter to the recent past, outlining the approaches to mass communications that India followed during the decades of international decolonization and developmental socialism prior to 1991. Before doing so, I will turn my attention further back to the period when India was fitfully integrated into an imperial global system, and was in the process of taking shape as a nation. It was in this context that the arrival of mass communications systems played a vital role in constituting the political and cultural identity of modern India. As mass media systems in India were developed and woven into the fabric of social life, they became inextricably caught up with critical debates surrounding the future society that India's inhabitants experience today.