

DIASPORIC AND TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNICATION: TECHNOLOGIES, POLICIES AND REGULATION

STEFAAN
VERHULST

New communications technologies are a key element of the increased capacity of diasporic and transnational communities to develop effective networks. Little comparative work has been carried out or published on the use of such communications technologies as part of emerging transnationalism and virtually no work has been done on comparing patterns of policy, law and regulation as “enablers” or “disablers” of these new networks or reactions on the part of nation-states to these patterns. In this issue, we seek to use an interdisciplinary approach — a prerequisite for research into the dynamics of diasporic communities — to assess the role of communications’ flow and regulation as, on the one hand, a catalyst for contemporary globalisation processes, and, on the other, as a response to perceived threats to the existing order from bottom-up challenges posed by global community networks.

This issue has been compiled at a time when the war in Kosovo has created a new diaspora. Ethnic cleansing, dispersal and regrouping are unfortunately not new phenomena (Van Hear 1997). The last half-century has been a dramatic tale of exodus. The forced displacement of minorities, including de-population and re-population tactics in support of territorial claims and self-determination has become an abominable characteristic of the contemporary world. In an increasingly insecure, globalised world, where populations are burgeoning in the poorest countries, abject poverty has caused millions of economic and environmental refugees to flee their land. History suggests that most of these population flows were forced — aggressors usually win — and that the first

Stefaan Verhulst is
Director of the Programme
in Comparative Media
Law and Policy, University
of Oxford.

law of diasporas is that return is painfully slow. Media and communications channels — if any — are often the only instruments that link the shattered segments of diasporic ensembles to each other and to their home country.

New technologies, and especially the Internet, as the Kosovo War has also shown, create the potential to disseminate and share information in a fast and effective way among those dispersed groups. Furthermore, diasporic members with origins in repressive or closed countries have been using on-line media and satellite technology to mobilise opposition not only within the diaspora but also among other sympathetic groups, as in the case of Med TV, the Kurdish satellite channel. The hypothesis that underlies this issue is thus that electronic communications flows lead to a more immediate, less impeded, more intense and more effective form of transnational bonding. Simultaneously, technological innovations have led in many cases to the construction of new diasporic or in some cases virtual identities, as well as to substantive reconfigurations of existing identities.

Diaspora, a Definition

Diaspora meant for the Greeks, from whose language the word originated, the dispersal of population through colonisation (Cohen 1997, ix). For Jews, Africans and Armenians and other peoples the word has acquired a more sinister and brutal meaning. Diaspora has come to mean a collective trauma, banishment into exile and a heart-aching longing to return home. During the early modern period, trade and labour diasporas supported the mercantilist and early capitalist worlds. Today the term has changed again, often implying a positive and ongoing relationship between migrants' homelands and their places of work and settlement. James Clifford defines diaspora also as "a whole range of phenomena that encourage multi-local attachments, dwelling and travelling" (quoted in Grossberg 1996, 101) which differs from the more anthropological definition of diaspora that in general refers to dispersed communities.

Common to all (Cohen 1997, 180) however — as is also illustrated in the following articles — is that all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, hence the often used synonym of transnational communities. This dispersion was often traumatically outside the individual's control (victims) such as in the case of wars, ethnic cleansing, natural disasters. Alternatively the expansion from a homeland was effected in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions. Hence the distinction between victim, trade, labour, imperial and cultural diasporas (Cohen 1997, 179). They all acknowledge that the home or old country has some claim on their loyalty and emotions, based upon a collective memory and myth about the supposed ancestral home. All transnational communities have significant effects on the politics of "home" and "host" countries and in the fostering of several important forms of social and cultural (ex-)change world-wide (Vertovec 1998). In sum, diasporas reflect cultural hybrids which identity that leap beyond the confines of the nation-state.

Diasporas as Re-imagined Communities

There has always been a great interest in the role of communications in creating new, usually wider and mainly political communities (Ong 1997), partly due to technological transitions within the media. This issue however is more concerned with the role of media in reconstructing or maintaining already established but somehow

fragile or imperilled communities: diasporas. There is, of course, a history to media and diasporic intensiveness. It is a history of film, newspaper, language, and association. A fundamental feature of all forms of community — whether large or small, mediated across time-space distances or situated in specific locales — is their symbolically constructed character. One important dimension in how to approach the category “communities” is to define them as “fictional realities” — things that are experienced as real and appear to have an objective existence, but which are actually created by the mind through the workings of an “imaginative geography.” It was historian Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1991) who suggested that what constituted members of a nation was, in part, a creation of print technology. This can also be extended analytically to other media. National communities are not only “imagined communities” but also communities that often began as audiences. However and in contrast to the work of Anderson, one could argue that questions raised by diasporic communication are indeed not limited only to those concerning the construction of new identities. This issue focuses therefore on media and communications technologies whose vocation is not to create new identities but to prevent the death of existing ones (Dayan 1998). Diasporic communications enable the existence of re-imagined communities.

Moreover, the use of on-line media has created a “cyberspace” where users electronically reconstitute the relationship that existed before migration or dispersion. Newsgroups enable the participation of users with common interests, located around the world. Rheingold has labelled these “virtual communities” (Rheingold 1993). David Elkins — referring to Rheingold in his contribution — examines this relationship between new technologies and diasporas. He states that “these new technologies should sustain some existing groups and make possible new “virtual neighbourhoods.” An older social science literature postulated that “reference groups,” not limited to immediate face-to-face relations, could underpin attitudes and beliefs. This concept may be expanded and clarified by re-labelling reference groups as “virtual communities” and linking them to ethnicity, diasporas, and “in-gatherings” of several types. Karim Karim also considers these virtual communities as different from Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” since they are extra-national. “The communal identity that emerges is not the old one, but one that is hybrid of: past alliances, the re-establishment of relations through the newsgroup, as well as the experiences of negotiating real life in the new country of settlement and interaction with other individuals/groups in that society” (Karim 1998, 13).

Diasporic Communication and the Nation-State

Technological change can be overstated, but it is fairly clear that it has enabled more effective mobilisation of bottom-up redefinition of the power of dispersed groups to form new bonds of cohesiveness. In contrast to the ideology of assimilation, diasporic groups are now, with the tools of developing communications technology, working to maintain their identities, whether they are defined by religious fervour, ethnic pride, economic ambition, historic places of origin, by establishing supportive or interactive communities. Using Manuel Castells — who examines the network society and the power of identity — those groups can be partly considered as “resistance identities.”

Resistance identities are as pervasive in the network society as are the individualistic projects resulting from the dissolution of former legitimizing

identities that used to constitute the civil society of the industrial era. ... Thus, on the one hand, the dominant, global elite inhabiting the space of flows tend to consist of identity-less individuals ("citizens of the world"); while, on the other hand, people resisting economic, cultural, and political disfranchisement tend to be attracted to communal identity (Castells 1997, 356).

Moreover, those resistance groups "do not communicate with the state, except to struggle and negotiate on behalf of their specific interests/values" (Castells 1997, 356.)

Diasporic and transnational communication challenges the role and relevance of the nation-state. It was Arnold Toynbee who argued in his *Study of History* (1961) that world-wide diasporas rather than local national states could be the wave of the future. Again, Castells states here that "the trajectory of nationalism in the Information Age is more undetermined, according to the observation of recent experience. On the one hand, it can lead to retrenchment into a reconstructed nation-state, re-legitimising it on behalf of the nation, rather than of the state. On the other hand, it may supersede the modern nation-state, by affirming nations beyond the state, and building multilateral networks of political institutions in a variable geometry of shared sovereignty." This search for cultural identities which could replace the state-provided and institutionally embedded identities based on other potential individual and collective points of identification is an on-going process. It is often the media, in particular electronic communications which, by providing an instantaneous source of referential points, emerge at the forefront of the processes of the search for self-assertion, both individual and collective.

Ethnic community media play a crucial role here. Roza Tsagarousianou states, for instance, in her contribution on the development of Asian and Greek-Cypriot community media in Britain that "The realisation of citizenship rests upon the creation and maintenance of accessible public spaces where strangers meet, engage in processes of self-definition and representation, hear, attempt to understand by translating, deliberate and forge solidarities on the basis of shared values and goals. The realisation of citizenship therefore rests upon the encouragement of a culture of communication and the articulation to it of an ethics of solidarity and ethnic community media can certainly play a role to this effect."

Diaspora and Globalisation

It is clear from the discussion about the nation-state that diasporic connections are becoming increasingly significant in light of what is viewed as the diminishing importance of national borders and the increasing global linkages among non-state actors (Karim 1998). Arjun Appadurai is, however, rather reluctant in declaring the imminent "end of the era of the nation-state" (Appadurai 1996, 8); what he calls the "transnations" of diasporic communities do appear to be significant aspects of globalisation processes. Similarly, Joel Kotkin writes that "global tribes" will "increasingly shape the economic destiny of mankind" (Kotkin 1992, 4). Interesting is the fact that transnational communities are uniquely at once the products of, and catalysts for, contemporary globalisation processes. Robin Cohen states further in his book on Global Diaspora's that "Globalization and 'diasporisation' are separate phenomena with no necessary causal connections, but they 'go together' extraordinarily well" (Cohen 1997, 175). Furthermore, he acknowledges the disproportionate advantages which globalisation may confer upon diasporas. "Globalization has enhanced the practical,

economic and affective roles of diasporas, showing them to be particularly adaptive forms of social organisations" (Cohen 1997, 176). This relationship between diasporas and globalisation processes is further initiated by the growing trans-nationalisation of the media. Appadurai suggests, for instance, that as electronic media "increasingly link[s] producers and audiences across national boundaries, and as these audiences themselves start new conversations between those who move and those who stay, we find a number of diasporic public spheres" (Appadurai 1996, 22).

This deterritorialisation of identities and public spheres is the starting point of Naomi Sakr in her contribution on the Middle East and North Africa in this issue. Perlmutter, in describing deterritorialisation, depicts the world as being organised vertically by nation-states and regions, but horizontally by an overlapping, permeable multiple system of interaction — communities not of place but of interest, shared opinions and beliefs, tastes, ethnicities and religions (Perlmutter 1991, also quoted in Cohen 1997). Instead of the emergence of a homogenised global culture, multiple cultures are being syncretised in a complex way. Diasporas are clearly one important form of such a horizontal social organisation. But "de-territorialised" can also be applied to the diasporic media as Sakr explains when examining the development of satellite television in the Middle East and North Africa. "By definition these channels are 'de-terrestrialised,' but in many senses they also appear to be de-territorialised. That is to say they may be based abroad, target foreign audiences, hire foreign nationals and so on. At the same time the process of receiving them enables viewers to escape from the territorial and jurisdictional confines of the countries where they live."

Globalisation is thus becoming increasingly de-centred — not under the control of any group of nations, and still less of the large corporations, as Anthony Giddens explained in the *Reith Lectures 1999* (Giddens 1999). Moreover, its effects are felt just as much in the western countries as elsewhere. This is especially true of communications and media, and is certainly a result of the growing importance of ethnic and diasporic communication flows. Giddens claims that "reverse colonisation" is becoming more and more common. Reverse colonisation means that non-western countries influence developments in the West. Examples abound — such as the Latinising of Los Angeles, the emergence of a globally oriented high-tech sector in India, or the selling of Brazilian TV programmes to Portugal. These trends clearly challenge the debate and rationales on the New World Information and Communication Order that raged in the seventies and eighties and that revolved around the imbalance in communications flows between the North and the South. The cultural imperialism critique tended to disregard the largely autonomous centres of non-Anglophone cultural production and their regional ambits. John Sinclair has identified what he calls "geolinguistic regions" centred in developing countries around Mumbai for the Hindi film industry, Hong Kong for Chinese genre movies, Cairo for Arabic film and television, and Mexico City for film and television production in Spanish (Sinclair 1997, 159). These are the foci not only for contiguous regions where these languages are spoken but also the cultural hubs for world-wide diasporas (Karim 1998, 5). The cultural imperialism perspective indeed failed to realise the ability of media entrepreneurs in Southern countries to use and adapt new technologies for their own innovation. This innovation has certainly created tension between policy-makers, both in their home and host country, and commercial or even public media enterprises.

Regulation and Policy

The contributions to this issue also chart the way in which regulation and policy or the search for regulatory solutions is a function of perceived threats to the existing order because of the bottom-up strengthening of what might be called global community networks. In relation to the Internet, this is played out in terms of efforts to define the architecture of the infrastructure to provide greater control for the state. In terms of the satellite, it is played out in terms of limiting access to satellite antennas or limiting the access points or orbital slots available for beaming inward-bound signals.

There is, however, an irony in this approach. At the same time that states seek to limit the capacity of threatening groups to use media technology to further their bottom-up globalising, the same states seek to use this technology to organise diasporic groups whose affinities they prize. Or as Ithiel de Sola Pool has put it: "International communication is often considered a mixing blessing by rulers. Usually they want technical progress. ... But at the same time they do not want the ideas that come with them. They lament erosion of cultural integrity. They complain about foreign concepts. They worry about rising expectations. They resent the decline of compliance and of acceptance of the status quo." Pool concluded that many governments use regulations to quell this unease (Pool 1990). It is clear, however, that governments are playing an active part in shaping international communications. An Irish Broadcasting Green Paper (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, 1995) stated that: "In the new international broadcasting environment it is possible that public service broadcasting stations must, in order to survive, ... will need to develop an exportable product, ... be formally charged with the responsibility to address the Irish diaspora." This reflects not only the closed versus open approach, but also the traditional cultural versus commodity/industry dialectic behind much broadcasting policy.

Deterritorialisation also challenges the broadcasting and communications policy of the "host" countries of diasporic media as in the case of the United Kingdom with its growing role as a locus for the establishment of satellite signals to diasporic communities. The Independent Television Commission (ITC), the regulatory body within the UK that licenses commercial television has, for instance, at the moment licensed around 200 satellite television channels of which a majority do not target the domestic market. Both the ITC and the Foreign Office are therefore faced with important regulatory and policy questions concerning the operation of these signals. These tensions culminated in March 1999 with the suspension for a period of three weeks of the satellite television service licence of Med Broadcasting Ltd (Med TV), broadcasting to Kurdish communities all over Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The Commission considered that some broadcasts by Med TV contained calls to carry out acts of violence in Turkey, a breach of the UK Programme Code, following the capture of Ocalan. At the same time however the Turkish government has tried on several occasions to interfere with Med-TV's broadcasts, and to block Med TV's contracts with satellite space providers.

Other implications to be taken from those boundary-less media are the need for global regulation and, at the same time, the increased difficulty of enforcing global and national rules. Self-regulation is, in this context, often suggested. European Commissioners Martin Bangemann and Leon Brittan for instance proposed in October 1997 to launch an international debate regarding global communication policy, to establish a framework for international policy co-operation and to start a process which

could lead to the adoption of an “International Communications Charter” (EC, 1997). Yet, at the same time, faced with an increased transnational communications flow, partly diasporic, the European Union is deeply concerned regarding the preservation of cultural expressions and identities in Europe, as emphasised in several policy and regulatory documents. This mirrors — as David J. Elkins has described in his contribution to this issue — the limitation of a global approach that “stems from the diversity of things one might wish to accomplish in different countries: getting a consensus about child pornography just might be possible (in a decade? a century?) but surely not about freedom of speech (when countries such as China or Iran want more limitations on speech but others want fewer limitations), nor on the banning of American films or soap operas on the grounds that they are imperialistic.”

These are just some examples of the increased attention being paid to the concept of transnational communications and new technologies and its consequent tensions by governments and regulators. Many more questions can be posed. Or as Stuart Cunningham states for Australia: “the public nature of diasporic cultures and their relation to nation states and the public sphere raises issues of policy. Do multicultural policies need to take account of popular culture dynamics amongst diasporic groups to a much greater extent than hitherto? Are government apprehensions of Asian-Australian culture bound to inadequate notions of tradition and folklorics? To what extent are the current broadcasting and video industries, and future expansion within them, serving the cultural needs of Asian-Australian communities?” In the following articles, an exploration will be made of how these processes of diasporic communication may be understood in different regions and continents (Europe, Middle-East, North Africa, Australia and North America) and how it offers a way forward for the debate on policy and regulation formation of new technologies.

References:

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cohen, Robin. 1997. *Global Diasporas. An Introduction*. London: UCL Press/Routledge.
- Dayan, Daniel. 1998. Particularistic media and diasporic communications. In: T. Liebes and J. Curran (eds.), *Media, Ritual and Identity*, 103-113. London: Routledge.
- Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. 1995. *Active or Passive? Broadcasting in the Future Tense. Green Paper on Broadcasting*. Irish Government
- European Commission. 1997. *Communication to the Council of Ministers and to the European Parliament on “Globalisation and the Information Society.” Brussels: EC.*
- Giddens, Anthony. 1999. New World Without End. The 1999 Reith Lectures. *The Observer*, 11 March 1999, 31.
- Karim, Karim. 1998. *From Ethnic Media to Global Media: Transnational Communication Networks among Diasporic Communities*. Working Paper of the ESRC Transnational Communities Programme. Oxford University.
- Kotkin, Joel. 1992. *Tribes: How Race, Religion, and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy*. New York: Random House.
- Ong, Walter. 1997 *The Presence of the Word*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Perlmutter, Howard Victor. 1991. On the Rocky Road to the First Global Civilization. *Human Relations* 44, 9, 897 -1010.

- Pool de Sola, Ithiel. 1990. *Technologies without Boundaries; On Telecommunications in a Global Age*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Rheingold, Howard. 1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading and the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley.
- Sinclair, John. 1997. The Decentring of Cultural Imperialism: Televisation and Globalization in the Latin World. In K. Thompson (ed.), *Media and Cultural Regulation*. London: Sage.
- Toynbee, Arnold Joseph. 1961. *Study of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Hear, Nicholas. 1997. *New Diasporas. The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*. London: UCL Press/Routledge.
- Vertovec, Steve. 1998 ESRC Transnational Communities Programme. Oxford.