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Towards a World System Perspective on Cross-National Web Research

Joseph Turow and Rivka Ribak

Introduction

The World Wide Web as a term and as a phenomenon embodies a number of fundamental tensions. The Web's reach is technically world-wide, but in practice it is accessible only to a small proportion of the planet's population. Its subject matter travels globally but is by necessity experienced locally. Moreover, language barriers and content filters actually hamper different populations from confronting, or linking to, different content. The World Wide Web is, in reality, neither world-wide nor a fully interconnected web.

Our purpose in this contribution is to gain insight into the dialectic between the Web's global and local faces by constructing it as a dialogue that is anchored within transnational political and economical bearings. We begin by outlining two views – the essentialist/universalistic and the social constructionist – that underlie opposing ways to understand the global Web. We then argue that neither of these perspectives recognizes the multi-levelled struggles that are taking place in many societies that define Web technology simultaneously in terms of local cultures and world markets. Finally, we suggest that a 'world system' perspective can be helpful in pointing toward ways to contextualise a society's technological development and human practice within global political and economic parameters.

Cross-National Understanding of the Web

Essentialist/universalistic research assumes that technology has inherent features that affect people and societies in predictable and inescapable ways. Such research studies note that the Web's basic components – computers, monitors, network connections – can be seen everywhere, as can the browsers, search engines, chat rooms and instant messaging systems that link millions of surfers world-wide. It is therefore concluded that the whole world is exposed to the same Web (an *essentialist* claim) and that effects, problems and solutions, are built into the technology and are generalisable to virtually all locales – a *universalistic* claim (Buckingham 2000).

The obverse, relativist, view is that the applications of technologies, and the social problems and solutions they raise, are constructed through social practice.

Investigations of the early reception of, for example, the telephone, radio and television in the United States and elsewhere suggest that, although they have distinctive technological features, the social meanings and controversies around these features developed over time through elaborate interactions among various constituencies and regulatory regimes (Marvin 1988; Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). From this perspective, the Web, in particular, subverts any attempt to construe it as a fixed variable. Because it changes over time, a user cannot surf 'the same' Web twice. Because it is (re)constructed differently through multiple languages and Web pages in various places, users from different cultures might realistically visit wholly separate virtual villages and neighbourhoods. Finally, because it is interactive, the Web allows for intertwined and mutually constitutive relationships between medium, text and consumers, audiences or users.

The most consistent herald of the essentialist/universalistic view is the commercial market research industry. Companies such as Ipsos-Reid, Roper Starch, and Taylor Nelson Sofres release a flood of commercially generated data about the Web that shows up in the press, especially the online press.[13] They identify the national populations as distinguishable less in terms of their indigenous beliefs and practices and more in terms of ownership and exposure, blending all into universal consumers who might be enticed to buy goods or information from a Web site once they gain access to it (Turow 2001). Similar assumptions show up in much United States academic writing on Web marketing or Web privacy without specifying that the real focus of interest is a specific manifestation of the phenomenon available to particular segments of American society (see Brin 1998; Wind and Mahajan 2001).

The contrasting, relativist, view can be found at the heart of almost all studies that involve close observation of populations' use of new media as well as in a growing number of cross-national academic surveys of media use. Sonia Livingstone (1998; Livingstone and Bovill 2001), for example, emphasises the importance of the socio-political and economic contexts in relation to an important project on young people and the changing media environment in Europe.

The Need for a Third View

What both the essentialist and relativist perspectives have in common is their reluctance to explore encounters between local cultures and the Web in the context of transnational political and economic interests regarding the new technology. This limitation may seem clear in the case of essentialist thinkers, who privilege the Web's global impact with little attention to local context. But relativists also wear blinkers when it comes to understanding the interplay of the local with the transnational, even when conducting comparative analysis.

Livingstone (1998: 445), for example, practically rules out the possibility of cross-cultural research where countries are structurally interdependent or where one country may disproportionately influence the other when it comes to the adoption and arrangement of new media. She argues that 'to make ... comparisons [between countries] manageable in practice, the research should be restricted to modernized, western countries which are undergoing related sociopolitical changes; overlarge national differences would prevent observations interesting in one country being informative for another'.

The upshot of this guiding principle is that the dominant interest in reporting the results is on cross-national comparison without cross-national influence. In fact, four of the five studies presented in a *European Journal of Communication* issue devoted to the 12 country project headed by Livingstone (1998) treat the countries they compare as unrelated entities. They ignore the fact that many are geographically close to one another, many share languages and cultural products, and all belong to a European Economic Community that is developing pan-continental rules about electronic commerce, Internet privacy and a host of other activities that affect life on the Web.

Ironically, the only article that departs from this hermetic approach is one that compares the most geographically distant place in the study, Israel, with Denmark and France. The piece is concerned with 'how globalisation becomes embedded into the lives of children and adolescents in three very different countries' (Lemish et al. 1998: 554) and the authors conclude that 'the meetings between the global and the local can be those of coexistence and conflation rather than assimilation vs. isolationism'. While insightful, their analysis is nevertheless limited by blinkers regarding key questions that have been outside the province of the relativistic perspective: Where does the 'global' originate? What forces lie behind its interpenetration of the local? Does that interpenetration take place differently in countries that have substantially different socio-political and socio-economic environments?

A World System Perspective

To understand what a society's people think and do about the Web and why, we must contextualise its technological development and human practice within broad political and economic parameters. And, indeed, international economic competition is part of the contemporary Web in terms of both software and hardware. The developing relationships recall the core-, semi-periphery and periphery categories that Wallerstein (1984) and Skocpol (1984) have used in describing the hierarchy of the world system.

The Internet was developed by the American military and scientific establishments; its graphical Web interface was invented at an American university. Core-country corporate leaders such as Microsoft, Intel, AMD, and 3Com have situated outposts strategically in different parts of the world that reflect different positions on an innovation/cheap labour continuum. They mine nations in the core (in Europe and Japan) and the semi-periphery (in parts of Asia and South America) for their ability to contribute cutting-edge knowledge about hardware and software. They use countries at the periphery for their supply of inexpensive, stable and compliant manufacturing conditions. Independent firms in all regions vie to provide the large companies with component parts as well as to export their own innovations to Web-linked consumers (Kellerman 2000).

What is especially interesting about these relationships is that people in the semi-periphery often find it most profitable to create software and hardware that do not necessarily speak to their own practical and ideological concerns; instead, they address their products to their most prominent markets. Web privacy, security and child surfing, for example, are topics that have generated huge investments by consumers and Web firms in core regions. Firms in the semi-periphery must monitor these sensibilities, keeping up on debates regarding regulatory solutions and technological fixes that take place in front of United States regulatory agencies, the European Commission and within academic circles. This blurring of national and cultural boundaries is compounded by the large European and American polling organisations that aim to help global advertisers target Web users around the world. Their demographic and lifestyle categories, defined at the Euro-American centre of the global system, but increasingly relevant in its semi-periphery and even parts of its periphery, render traditional political distinctions obsolete.

These neo-colonial relationships between core countries, on the one hand, and semi-peripheral and peripheral countries, on the other, point to a neglected field of inquiry about the negotiation between the Web's global political economy and its local social construction. For example, if a semi-peripheral society emphasises high-tech exports that cater to Web needs in the United States and is surrounded by American popular culture about Web issues, should we expect that its members share the same sense of the Web's power, and its potential and problems, as members of the United States society?

This question implies propositions regarding comparative research that are quite different from the ones that Livingstone posits about the comparison of core countries. Here the emphasis is on sharply different socio-economic conditions (core vs. peripheral or core vs. semi-peripheral) and often sharply different

political and cultural circumstances. It would undoubtedly be wrong, however, to assume from the outset a totalising influence of core countries on their suppliers. World system theorist Robertson (1997: 72) has noted that in contemporary capitalism the complex issues involved in formulating all sorts of social identities are bound up in complex interactions of global, often market-related, forces with local, also often market-driven, influences. He calls this 'the universalisation of particularism and the particularisation of universalism'. It suggests that cross-national studies of attitudes and actions around the Web must be alert to the flows of influence from many directions, at many levels, and across time.

The world system perspective has proven to be a useful lens for comparative analysis of parents' and youngsters' attitudes toward the Web in Israel and the United States. We started our project with an awareness that the positions of the two countries within the world system are strikingly different. The international economic and military influence of the United States places it at the core of the world system. Israel's regional military power, relatively high per capita income, and knowledge-based economy, places it between the edge and the centre, or at the semi-periphery, of the global hierarchy.

The two nations also have very different traditions of individualism, personal privacy and government and business responsibility. Yet Israel is interpenetrated by an American agenda on these issues. The country produces hardware and software for American (and, by extension, world) markets that must take US-based views on the topics into account. With relatively few Web sites in Hebrew, Israeli Web users navigate to sites based in the United States and communicate through applications, using software and hardware that (wherever produced) map onto an American ideology in general and concerns about privacy, in particular. Moreover, national press coverage and entertainment programming about the Web centre on American sensibilities regarding information disclosure and translate controversies over United States government and business into local parlance.

The world system perspective sensitises us to the following question: In the face of the countries' very different traditions of individualism, personal privacy and institutional responsibility, to what extent, and how, does Israel's US-centred (and somewhat export-oriented) business and media agenda find its way into individual Israelis' views and actions on those topics when it comes to the Web? This question certainly cannot be answered definitively through an initial foray into cross-national survey research. Whether and what portions of society are changed, how much, and what resistance there is to 'imported' views is a topic that requires comparative ethnographic field explorations, historical analyses and longitudinal studies.

While clearly complex, the topic of transnational influences is fascinating and important. The challenge that the world system perspective raises especially with respect to countries outside the core, but also to countries within it, is to relate people's attitudes and that which takes place locally, to the national and global socio-political system. That, metaphorically and practically, is what 'the Web' is really about.