

Media and the Global Divide

A Bottom-up and Citizen Perspective

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Abstract

When addressing media and global divides, the focus of the problem is often on the overall global trends in media and cultural production – identifying current developments in different regions of the worlds, and illustrating the complexity of these developments within the media and communications panorama in general and cultural production in particular. However, with the present paper, I wish to complement such meta perspectives by offering a bottom-up and more grounded perspective upon globalization and the role of media in articulating, or not articulating, divides.

Consequently, as my commentary to the overall theme for the 2008 IAMCR conference, here I reflect upon media and global divides from the perspective of how these divides are experienced in everyday life, by ordinary citizens. Particular emphasis is put upon people who are marginalized in the societies where they live. My brief examples are from rural Malawi, low-income urban Brazil and amongst ethnic minorities in Denmark. The lived divides are approached from three perspectives, that of the material divides, the socio-cultural divides and the symbolic divides. Following an account of these different lived divides, I assess the ‘citizen tactics’, that is, the different attempts to overcome the identified divides, suggesting that by understanding the character of such citizen tactics, we can also understand the (re-)configuration of political identities in times of global divides.

Keywords: global divides, citizenship, globalization, communication for development, social change, media ethnography, citizen media

Introduction

...while globalization is identified as an important part of modernity, it is frequently obvious, although left implicit, that where theorists are really at home is still the West: western Europe, North America. Possibly Japan has by now been added, but on the whole theorists are still Occidentalists. It ought perhaps to be made an obligation on the part of those who discuss modernity in general – or such related abstract notions as ‘knowledge society’ or ‘information society’ (or ‘global divide’, I would add, ed) – to try to give some real attention to the implications of what they are saying to people at the margins of the global ecumene: not just to see whether their claims hold, but also to ponder the consequences of emerging uneven distributions (Hannerz 1996: 55)

What do current media development trends, processes of cultural globalization and, consequently, the possible global divide look like as a lived experience *amongst peasants*

in rural Malawi, amongst low-income urban women in the *favelas of Brazilian cities* or amongst *2nd generation immigrant youth in an old workers neighbourhood-turned-immigrant community in Copenhagen*? My main objective is to narrate experienced ‘divides’ and how the citizens themselves try to overcome them.

What *does* the concept of ‘the global divide’ actually mean and entail, seen from a citizen perspective? When you ground this question in the lived experience of cultural globalization, the global divide becomes lived experience of inclusion or exclusion, representation and participation: global *divides*. Beyond material conditions expressed as a technology-focused digital divide, the global divides, in relation to media, are cultural, social and symbolic divides: lived experiences of lack of recognition or lack of identification, misrepresentation or lack of representation, and also lack of participation in processes of media and cultural production.

Analysing global divides in relation to media in everyday life becomes an analysis of experienced mediatized divides related to processes of social inclusion, identity formation and citizenship. It may concern experienced divides in relation to people and nations elsewhere on the globe, but just as likely experienced divides in one’s own country or community.

In this context, the media are the mediators of lived experience, access-givers to symbolic worlds of entertainment and global news reporting. They also become facilitators of and providers of spaces for public debate and for participation in society. By analysing media and global divides from an everyday perspective, the object of study does not become the technologies *per se*, but how they facilitate social networking, enhance processes of identity formation, enable access to and participation in public debates and ultimately enhance possibilities for citizens to express themselves and engage in society.

Consequently, the first point I wish to make, and illustrate with some brief examples, is the variety and diversity within the interconnectedness inherent in ‘global divide’. The Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, reflecting upon modernity, states: ‘One of the great advantages of a conception of modernity as an expansive civilization is that it draws attention to global asymmetries, to center-periphery relations. Modernity was not originally everywhere, and if it has spread everywhere, or is at least making itself felt everywhere, it is present under quite variable conditions’ (ibid.).

The global divide can be seen as a perspective upon modernity as such, an expansive civilization where global asymmetries and ‘variable conditions’ exist. An attempt to understand this dimension of modernity and of contemporary world development speaks to the need to deconstruct the lived experiences of the same. Consequently, the first question to raise when attempting to understand the global divide, and in particular the media’s role in the global divide, concerns identifying some of the different aspects of the lived experience of media and the global divide: What divides are people experiencing in everyday life?

The lived divides can be approached from many perspectives, of which I will focus on three:

- Firstly, the perspective of *material divides* where the emphasis is on understanding the degree and forms of access to media and communication technologies.
- Secondly, the perspective of *social-cultural divides* where the divide is beyond a question of material access to the media, but about the socio-economic divisions in society, power relations and media ownership. The media perspective on these divides

concerns the role the media potentially can play in bridging these divides, articulating social change processes and offering quality public service to their audiences.

- Thirdly, the focus will be on *symbolic divides*, where the divide concerns the lack of representation and the misrepresentation of particular social groups in the media, resulting in a lack of voice.

Following an exploration into the different ways media and global divides are experienced by ordinary citizens, the question that emerges concerns overcoming some of these divides. The question becomes one of agency and change: How can marginalized citizens, affected by the above-mentioned material, socio-economic and symbolic divides, engage and participate in processes whereby they can overcome these divides? This question speaks to the possible articulation of the ways and means by which some of the examples of experienced divides can be overcome.

Experienced Divides

What divides are people experiencing in everyday life? To address this question, brief examples are provided from three places where I have conducted media ethnographic research over the past years: rural Malawi, low-income urban Brazil and low-income urban and immigrant Denmark. These accounts are merely indications of the different experiences of media and global divides that are found across the globe.

Malawi: Material Divide and Radical Exclusion

Living as a peasant in rural Malawi in Southern Africa is probably as marginal as you can get as a member of the ‘global ecumene’ of well-connected media consumers (Hannerz 1996). Typically, you live in a small village with either no electricity or occasional electricity, no TV sets in the village and at most one landline telephone in the vicinity, probably at the closest health care facility. Most of you and your neighbours have radios, small portable ones you – if you are a man – can carry around. However, often the radio is silent, because you cannot afford the batteries. This scenario is a common one for rural Malawi.

Malawi is one of the world’s 5 poorest countries, ranking 167 on the UNDP Human Development Index. Consequently, media are far from as widespread as in many other countries. Television *per se* is a novelty, only introduced into Malawi in 1999. Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation, the public service entity providing radio and TV, is stripped of resources, providing irregular and rather poor quality programming to primarily a select urban audience. National production is very limited. In the rural areas, television is practically inaccessible.

Radio, however, is widespread, but still not with full coverage. A survey by Malawi Broadcasting Company (MBC, 2006) indicated that although 92% had access to radio at home, 22% of those with radio access had radios that were not working. Of these 22%, almost half (43%) explained that they had no batteries and 39% indicated technical faults. In other words, they couldn’t afford even batteries or repairing their radios. The same survey indicated strong dissatisfaction with poor signals and poor reception in many parts of Malawi.

As for media content, a small inquiry I conducted of the radio entertainment supply in 2005 illustrated that 9 entertainment-education radio dramas were on air at that par-

ticular time, funded primarily by international donors via either UN agencies, bilateral donors or through NGOs and CBOs. Most of these programmes dealt with conveying development-related messages and raising development-related debates using radio drama formats (Tufté 2007). This speaks to a very precarious situation with regards to production of radio programming, with close to no funds available, if they are not provided by external funding agencies. Ironically, these international donors do their best to put their international insights and experience to the service of the Malawian people, but the question is rather: Do these institutionalized, often donor-driven initiatives provide the media content the Malawians prefer, can understand and can access?

Contrary to some of these initiatives, what is rather widely available and accessed, in particular amongst younger men, are 'video parlours', which are informal cinemas organized as video/DVD screenings, often in private homes, where the owner charges a minimal fee for each screening. Action films and pornographic films are amongst the most popular screenings, representing a very particular dimension of possible symbolic worlds these young men access. Very limited knowledge exists as to the sense-making processes resulting from these particular media consumption patterns.

With regards to telephony, landline phones are very few in the rural areas. This is however changing these days, and mobile phones are experiencing a *de facto* boom in many African countries, including Malawi. This is articulating new social relations and dynamics. For instance, bank transfers by mobile phone have become possible. This, at the level of anecdote and from the Masais in Kenya rather than rural Malawi, is leading to changing patterns of social interaction, where urban Masai dwellers are remaining in the cities and often simply transferring funds occasionally to their rural communities of origin rather than visiting them (Talle, 2009). Internet remains practically inaccessible in rural areas, with only occasional telecentres providing access, or occasional Internet cafés at larger trading centres or in towns.

In this context, the degree of mediated everyday life experienced by the common Malawian peasant is practically non-existent – it is only gradually growing and remains very much a still-to-be-explored experience. Here, the significant material divide is reinforcing the lived experience of radical socio-economic exclusion and marginalization. The non-access to national and international news, the limited possibilities of involvement in any mediated public debate, the lack of representation and no participation in any mediated cultural production place the rural Malawian at the very margins of the culture economy.

Brazil: Cultural Proximities but Social Divides

Living in a low-income urban area in Brazil, for example in one of the shanty towns, *favelas*, in the outskirts of Sao Paulo, where I have conducted fieldwork, is a very different experience than that of rural Malawi. The typical favela-dweller lives in a very compact household environment. There are many household members, and they live very close to their neighbours in a cramped neighbourhood, often on occupied territory or land that they do not own. They have high media access, are heavy media consumers and generally orient themselves towards the enormous supply of national media production, especially the serial TV fiction, the telenovelas.

Most households have a TV set, most often an old one, and many even have a video or a DVD player. Radio access is close to 100%, and in the better-off areas of low-income urban peripheries computers with Internet access are found. The large majority cannot afford either cable TV or satellite TV, but they primarily have access to the large national TV stations, especially Rede Globo's channels. Rede Globo is the largest TV network in Latin America and in the 1990s was the world's largest producer of TV fiction, primarily in the form of telenovelas. Thus, the *favela* dweller lives in a strong media environment characterized furthermore by the massive presence of national production of all programme formats including ordinary TV news, dramatized TV news formats, reality and TV talk shows, and not least the telenovelas and mini-series (Tufté 2000). Since the early 1970s, telenovelas have dominated the Brazilian prime-time television and as such have also been an important instrument in promoting national cultural integration in this enormous country.

The above-described media situation in Brazil is contradictory. While all 180 million Brazilians have massive access to media and one might say they are highly integrated in terms of national cultural identification, the social divide in society prevails and is immense. Brazil was for years identified by UNDP as the most socially unequal society in the world. In other words, the high degree of access to at least traditional radio and TV is by no means an indicator of any sort of socio-economic progress.

The culture economy in Brazil is extremely well developed, and audiences of all socio-economic strata have high degree of access, including most *favela* dwellers. Also, the telenovelas in particular provide some visibility of socio-cultural issues of concern also to the *favela* dweller, and in many ways the media serve as a public forum and articulator of public debate. However, despite the fine-tuned 'cultural connection' between media and audience, the extreme socio-economic conditions prevail. Conclusively, Brazil – despite massive media access and strong national cultural integration – remains a country with a dramatic social divide.

Denmark: Full Media Access but Symbolic and Cultural Divides

In Nørrebro, a former workers neighbourhood in central Copenhagen, you find 60+ languages spoken amongst the immigrant communities that have settled there over the past two to three decades. Living in Nørrebro, as a family of say Kurdish-Turkish origin, or of Pakistani origin, you most likely have complete access to both radio, TV, including satellite or cable TV, Internet access and mobile phones. At home, it is likely that the children in the family have a TV in their (shared) bedroom, and that there is a larger TV screen in the living room. (Grand-)Parent viewing habits most likely dominate the media consumption patterns in the living room. This consumption often has a strong orientation towards the country of origin. Contrary to this, the children's bedroom media consumption is far more mixed and with a high level of consumption of American TV sitcoms, series and shows, much like that of most youth in Denmark. Mobile phones are widespread, often times extending and reinforcing existing social networks, but also instruments of social control, for example allowing parents to 'let go' of their young daughters, as long as they remain in SMS contact (Tufté 2003).

Approximately 25% of the population in Nørrebro are immigrants, former refugees or children of immigrants or refugees. At the national level, these populations constitute

roughly about 8-9% of the population. While Danish radio and television continues to be dominated by state-owned public service media, the media consumption amongst especially 1st but also to some degree 2nd and even 3rd generation immigrants is not concentrated on the Danish public service media, or on Danish media in general. We find a significant presence of ‘homeland media’ in their media consumption patterns (Tuftte 2002). Or stated differently: Immigrant communities in Denmark often navigate between diasporic media practices and consumption of both American mainstream and Danish media content.

What I found in my research amongst ethnic minority youth in Nørrebro was a strong feeling of non-representation or misrepresentation in the media (Tuftte 2002). A series of events in the neighbourhood was covered in unfair ways in the media. Combined with a generally stereotyped negative representation of young ethnic minorities, it sparked, amongst these young ethnic minorities, disappointment, anger, apathy, and more generally, a sense of social – and political – exclusion from Danish society. The ‘war against terrorism’ in recent years has accentuated a strong focus on terrorism that is associated not only with fundamentalist Muslims, but that very quickly spilled over into associations with Muslims in general and to non-ethnic Danes in general, particularly those of distant cultural origin, i.e. the large Pakistani, Marokkan, Palestinian, Somali, Iranian and Iraquian communities in Denmark. The most recent and dramatic shooting episodes in the neighbourhood of Nørrebro in the spring of 2009 have reinforced a stereotypical media representation of 2nd generation ethnic minority youth as criminal gangs.

Citizen Tactics

Overcoming the global divides and the role of the media in these divides is a question of tactics. ‘Tactics’ is the concept developed by the late French sociologist Michel de Certeau in his book ‘The Practice of Everyday Life’ (de Certeau, 1984). Tactics, according to de Certeau, are the efforts made by ordinary people to create spaces for themselves, whereby they can overcome the ‘strategies’, or the structures of power, to which they are subject due to institutions’ actions and impositions. We can argue that the role of the media – the mainstream and large scale media – constitutes one such set of institutions exercising strategies. The response to this for ordinary citizens is to seek to develop *citizen tactics* – ways and means to carve out their own appropriation and meaning and thus produce a resistance to the structures of power to which they are exposed in everyday life.

Now, what do such tactics consist of? Citizen tactics speak to questions of agency, ownership and identity formation, and they relate a need to identify the ways in which citizens exert agency, articulate ownership and form their identity in accordance with their own norms and values, trajectories and projections for the future. In the three settings we are examining – rural Malawi, favela Brazil and immigrant urban Copenhagen, Denmark – such tactics are taking on very different characteristics.

Malawi – Exercising Citizenship through Media and Communication

As a peasant in rural Malawi, overcoming material, socio-economic and symbolic divides is a complicated matter. Very slow technological developments in the rural areas of Malawi, combined with the extreme poverty situation even with frequent famines in recent years, severely limit the ability to overcome material divides, not to mention the socio-economic

and symbolic divides. A weak media infrastructure, and very incipient civil society and very young traditions for democracy and civic engagement, produces a difficult point of departure. However, despite the gloomy scenario, the possibilities of overcoming divides are well illustrated by a current civil society initiative developed by ADRA Malawi, the Adventist Development and Relief Association, a faith-based NGO.

ADRA Malawi has developed an innovative 'communication for social change' strategy for HIV/AIDS prevention. This social-change-oriented communication strategy involves exercising citizenship through media and communication and through this approach, improving HIV/AIDS prevention. Basically, ADRA has developed an integrated approach to development and awareness raising, where food security (community gardens), awareness raising via mass media (radio drama, TV drama and radio talk shows) and community dialogue sessions (in 20 rural communities) are addressed in a holistic and synergetic manner.

The food security programme has a community development aspect to it as well, in enhancing some limited degree of local economic development and trade. Awareness raising on HIV/AIDS is pursued by producing media programmes based on formative research and drawing on local traditions of theatre, storytelling and embracing local cultural traditions, in regards to humour, myths and artistic expression. The community dialogue sessions focus on debating HIV/AIDS, often times connected to what is in the radio programming. Finally, the radio talk show has a key element of advocacy, inviting opinion leaders and responsible leaders into the studio to debate, but also to be held accountable for initiatives they are involved in.

In these manners, available technologies, primarily the radio, are used for advocacy, public debate and awareness raising, and connected to community dialogue sessions with the explicit aim to articulate public debate, enhancing some degree of voice and public participation, even from the rural areas. Thereby, the initiative, set forth in some of the most distant and marginalized communities not only of southern Malawi but of the world, constitutes a modest attempt to connect the local peasant and rural community with contemporary processes of mediatized local, national and global development. A well-developed monitoring and evaluation scheme is documenting the changes.

Brazil – Active Sense-Making, Social Movements and Community Radio

In Brazil, the experienced divides are of a socio-cultural nature, where the mainstream media, Rede Globo in particular, for many favela dwellers plays a decisive role in processes of sense-making and identity formation, but also in the articulation of civic engagement and participation in the public debate. Parallel to this heavily mediatized society we also find social movements and a strong civil society articulating other voices in the media, expressed most significantly in the current community media movement (Peruzzo 2008). Due to a new media law in 1998, community radio stations in particular have mushroomed in the past decade to more than 10,000, thereby becoming a significant alternative mediated public sphere. Thus, these two key elements, Rede Globo and its telenovelas on one hand, and the community media movement on the other, are *both* perspectives that can be highlighted as relevant pathways in reinforcing cultural identity, overcoming the social divides, and engaging favela dwellers in public debate and social change in Brazil.

Firstly, in response to the massive presence of commercially produced national telenovelas in everyday life, it is important not just to discard this heavily mediatized everyday life as a situation that articulates apathy and passivity. Many opposite processes can be identified. The telenovelas have been seen to articulate strong public debates on social, cultural and political issues and as such serve as a useful tool in the development of open discussion cultures, and consequently in the articulation of civic engagement in public debate. At the level of identity formation, the telenovelas, consumed for up to 3-4 hours daily by many *favela* dwellers, also serve to articulate a particular ‘tactical space’ in everyday life – what I previously have called ‘hybrid spheres of signification’ (Tufté 2000). These spaces are intermediary zones in everyday life, spaces of media reception and of sense-making, constituted both physically in the in-betweens of the public and private spaces, and symbolically, negotiating both gender roles, the rural past of many families and the urban present. It is a space in everyday life that becomes central to the formation of self and of identity, a symbolic construct from which the processes of cultural hybridization and interaction with the mass media make their way out into the innumerable practices of everyday life (Tufté 2000).

Secondly, community media have in recent years come to occupy a central space in the Brazilian media debate and in providing many local communities a voice, a discursive space, and thus an entry point into the public debate in Brazil. The alternative media or ‘citizen media’ (Rodríguez 2001) have existed for a long time in Brazil – in the 1960s and 1970s in the form of theatre and radio, in the 1980s with the alternative video movements, in the 1990s with some local TV experiences, and experiments with smaller cable TV stations. Today, the Internet, combined with the traditional media, has opened up a broad range of citizen media initiatives (Wildermuth 2009).

Denmark – Public Service Broadcasting and Public Debate

The lived experience with media and the global divides amongst ethnic minority youth in Denmark refer primarily to a divide in relation to the national Danish frame of reference. Stereotyped representations and lack of representation in the national Danish media, in addition to a strong sense of non-belonging and apathy, have been prevalent amongst many youth ethnic minorities. These mediated experiences of a symbolic divide are somewhat contradictory to the fact that Denmark has a strong public service broadcasting infrastructure with both major national public service media and a legal framework and state budget in support of local TV and radio production. Thus, supported by this framework is a broad variety of ethnic minority media, spanning from Turkish music radio stations and local Arab television in Danish (ATV) and to a diasporic TV channel for the European Kurdish population.

While the public service broadcasting is well developed, some of the experiences of non-inclusion, discrimination and misrepresentation seem connected to broader questions of transnational migration, but also to the deeper processes of cultural transformation in the Danish society, and to some of the inertia against such processes amongst ethnic majority Danes. To counter some of these processes, and the experiences of cultural and discursive polarization in the media, we do find noteworthy public service programmes. One example is X-factor, a musical talent show, a globalized concept-based programme format, where a large number of the approximately 10 finalists in the Danish version

of the programme where ethnic minorities. Suddenly, the common terminology of ‘2nd generation immigrants’ and ‘ethnic minority youth’ vanished, and the finalists were referred to by their first names, Mohammad, Danushan, Patricia and Marcel. Ironically, ethnic minority youth are becoming increasingly visible on the musical scene in Denmark, thus in the culture economy, not with their negative stereotypes but as talented *Danish* cultural performers, thereby contradicting some of the persistent symbolic and socio-cultural divides experienced in everyday life.

Bridging the Divides?

The role of the media and of communication structures at all levels (community, sub-regional, national, regional and international) is inextricably bound up with how citizens understand and engage in democratic life. The rights and capacities of people, particularly those living in poverty, to voice their own perspective and have them heard in public debate, particularly through the media, are increasingly recognized as critical to effective governance (James Deane 2008: 161)

In the above quote, Head of Policy Development at BBC World Service Trust, James Deane, speaks to one of the fundamental questions at stake when discussing media and global divides: the question of how citizens understand and engage in democratic life. It is a question of citizens’ rights and capacities to voice their own perspectives. Without such possibilities, effective governance and democratic life are difficult.

If we assess the three cases I have mentioned in relation to these democratic principles, then we see very different scenarios. Each in their way, the lived experiences and *citizen tactics* in rural Malawi, in low-income urban Brazil, and amongst ethnic minorities in Denmark have illustrated global divides regarding the role of the media. The examples are not exclusively *either* material divides *or* socio-cultural divides *or* symbolic divides. However, all three examples narrate ways and means whereby citizens, via the de Certeau’ean ‘tactics’, seek to articulate not only resistance to the divides, but to pro-actively overcome them.

While the overall trends within the culture economy point towards reinforced divides, the civil-society-driven struggle to overcome these global divides is a steadily growing process taking place on multiple levels, in a variety of spaces. This current global process is an open process, rooted in a multitude of bottom-up and citizen-driven initiatives of which three have briefly been discussed here. However, really understanding the potential of these processes will require in-depth empirical studies of the outlined divides, contextualized in globalization studies. Enhancing citizenship in this context is, as the Mexican cultural analyst Rossana Reguillo states, about understanding the re-configuration of political identities:

...conceiving globalisation from the perspective of communication and its articulation with the social is, possibly, to understand where what we might call the re-configuration of the political identities is occurring. (It’s the) pursuit of a citizenship as a process open for definition (Reguillo 2005: 70).

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