

# Transnational Journalism History

## Balancing Global Universals and National Peculiarities

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### Abstract

This article argues that an approach focused on the historical transformation of journalistic routines and textual forms makes it possible to overcome a confinement to national histories. This kind of study focuses on the transfer of norms, practices and forms, and their adaptation in national contexts. It has an eye for dissimilarities regarding the pace and content of transformations between and within countries. It emphasizes transnational contacts, networks and patterns and underlines intertwining national and transnational developments.

As a field of study, journalism history is institutionally and topically confined primarily to national boundaries. Media, journalism and press historians still predominantly study events and developments in a nation state framework without structurally considering international developments and cross-border influences. This holds true for studies restricted to the development of journalism in one country, like most press histories, as well as studies that take nations as units for comparative research, with two or more countries studied as separate cases and compared. The differences, and to a lesser extent the similarities, in the working routines or coverage of certain issues are usually highlighted as autonomous developments and ascribed to national peculiarities.

The roots of this limited horizon might go back to the nineteenth century, when history emerged as a scholarly discipline in a close, even dialectic relation to the birth of modern nation states and the construction of national identities. Ever since, the nation seems to be the most natural level of analysis for historians.<sup>1</sup> Press and media history follow this general pattern in historiography by studying the media as national institutions inhe-

rent to national politics, laws and markets, and topically and socially geared towards national, regional or local communities. Most scholarship on press history departs from the normative assumption that journalism is defined in terms of its democratic function. Like historical research, the rise of the media landscape as-we-know-it is thus intertwined with the modern nation state.<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of the globalization paradigm stimulated the use of comparative and transnational research in the more contemporary fields of media and journalism studies, but journalism history seems to have lacked a trigger of this kind. To a certain extent however, historical scholarship in general has an eye for transnational developments. A transnational turn occurred in the study of international relations, which initially emerged as a branch of political history in the 1970s. Notably the continuing process of European integration and the founding of transnational political and military organizations like the UN and NATO, causing a transfer of political decision-making authority to the supra-national level, led to transnational studies. Globalization stimulated more historical research on international dependence,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michael G. Müller and Cornelius Torp, 'Conceptualising transnational spaces in history', *European Review of History - Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 16 (2009), 609-617.

<sup>2</sup> See for national press histories: Michael Emery, Edwin Emery and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America. An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997, 9<sup>th</sup> ed.); Kevin Williams, *Read all about it! A history of the British newspaper* (London: Routledge, 2009); Huub Wijfjes, *Journalistiek in Nederland 1850-*

*2000. Beroep, organisatie en cultuur* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2004); Els De Bens and Karin Raeymaeckers, *De pers in België. Het verhaal van de Belgische dagbladpers. Gisteren, Vandaag en morgen* (Leuven: Lannoo Campus, 2007); Claude Bellanger et al. (eds), *Histoire Générale de la Presse Française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969-1976, 5 vols); Klaus Bruhn Jensen ed., *DanskMedie historie*, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Samleren Forlag, 1996-1998); Henrik Bastiansen and Hans Fredrik Dahl, *Norsk Mediehistorie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2008).

and post-colonialism and the diaspora stimulated the debate on cultural exchange.<sup>3</sup>

As no pan-European public sphere has emerged and the media continue to operate primarily at the national level, journalism history continues to study journalism as a resultant and producer of national culture. Even in the study of media systems, a field largely left to political communication scholars, the underlying assumption is that every nation has its own distinctive media culture only similar to other territorially-bound media cultures to a limited extent.<sup>4</sup> In their influential *Comparing Media Systems*, Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini draw a distinction between a liberal (Atlantic), a democratic corporatist (Northern European) and a polarized pluralist (Southern European) model. The countries in the various models are 'national variants' of these broader media systems.<sup>5</sup>

The dearth of comparative and transnational studies can be explained by historical methodology and a still dominant focus on institutions in journalism history. Firstly, historians often feel uncomfortable with the abstract theories and models needed to grasp developments that transcend territorial spaces. They usually work ideographically by focusing on singular, unique cases and emphasizing their specifics. As Peter Burke notes, scholars from the social sciences, interested in universal patterns and mechanisms, consider historians 'amateurish, myopic fact-collectors without system or method, the imprecision of their "data base" matched only by their incapacity to analyse it.' The other way around, historians believe social scientists 'state the obvious in a barbarous and abstract jargon, lack any sense of place and time, squeeze individuals without mercy into rigid categories, and to cap it all, describe these activities as "scientific".'<sup>6</sup> However, comparative and transnational research presupposes categori-

zation, abstraction and generalization. Historians often feel the fine distinctions they consider important are lost in the process.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, the study of journalism history still largely focuses on the institutional, political and economic structures journalism grew in. Since these frameworks are mainly national, this obviously does not encourage comparative or transnational research. In a notorious 1974 article, American media scholar James Carey states that journalism history is 'something of an embarrassment'. He notes that press historians 'defined our craft too narrowly and too modestly' and advocates a cultural approach that would shed light on journalism, journalists and news processes. He suggests studying the emergence and development of journalistic practices and forms aiming to represent social reality at a given moment.<sup>8</sup> Carey's cry for action had some responses in recent decades, but the history of reporting still largely remains to be written. The same goes for comparative and transnational studies with a truly comprehensive and interwoven picture of international journalism history.

In this article, I argue that an approach focused on the historical transformation of journalistic routines and textual forms makes it possible to overcome a confinement to national histories. This kind of study focuses on the transfer of norms, practices and forms, and their adaptation in national contexts. It has an eye for dissimilarities regarding the pace and content of transformations between and within countries. It emphasizes transnational contacts, networks and patterns and underlines intertwining national and transnational developments. Below I define what transnational history is and argue that a transnational narrative is implicitly evident in journalism history. I conclude with some suggestions for future research on transnational journalism history.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Patricia Clavin, 'Time, Manner, Place: Writing Modern European History in Global, Transnational and International Contexts', *European History Quarterly* 40 (2010), 624-640; Akira Iriye, 'Transnational History', *Contemporary European History* 13 (2004), 211-222.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Hepp and Nick Couldry, 'What should comparative media research be comparing? Towards a transcultural approach to 'media cultures'', in: D. K. Thussu (ed.), *Internationalizing Media Studies: Impediments and Imperatives* (London: Routledge, 2010), 32-47, 36; Cf. Henrik G. Bastiansen, 'Media History and the Study of Media Systems', *Media History* 14 (2008), 95-112.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2004); Bastiansen, 'Media History', 103.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, 'Comparative History: Methods, Aims, Problems', in: D. Cohen and M. O'Connor, *Comparison and History. Europe in Cross-national Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 25.

<sup>8</sup> James Carey, 'The Problem of Journalism History', in: Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (eds), *James Carey: A Critical Reader* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 86-94; First published in: *Journalism History* 1/1 (1974), 3-5, 27.

## National, transnational and global journalism history

What is transnational journalism history, and what should it be? It is useful in this respect to distinguish three spatial levels of analysis. At the *national* level, research subjects are confined by territorial boundaries. National developments and national journalism are studied individually. Not much attention is devoted to contact with other nations or cultures, and mutual interdependencies and influences are not taken into account. Change and innovation are mostly characterized as national peculiarities and ample research is conducted on international contacts or the transfer of foreign examples in professional networks. Most comparative research is conducted at this level. It considers and compares nations as more or less stable and isolated units. Since it indicates the study of interactions between various autonomous national actors, the prefix *inter* as in international or intercultural is bound to this analytical level as well.

At the *global* level, research subjects are deterritorialized. Research into global or globalized journalism is a recent novelty anticipating the globalization paradigm. As a result it mainly focuses on contemporary topics, but one could adopt a global approach to early modern or post-Cold War history as well. The eighteenth-century republic of letters, for example, was a deterritorialized space where an international audience came together, consumed information and discussed it in a common language. In addition to a global audience, global journalism also presupposes a universal global logic that traverses national boundaries and leads to a convergence of practices, forms and issues.<sup>9</sup>

*Transnational* journalism history works at the *meso*-level. It focuses on cross-national interaction, the movement of agents, ideas, innovations, norms and social and cultural practices across borders, and their consecutive incorporation and adaptation into national frameworks. It is

outward-looking, dynamic, emphasizing connectivity, heterogeneity and interdependence, and acknowledges that 'cultural forms are increasingly generated and communicated across various territories'.<sup>10</sup> By moving back and forth between the national and transnational level, journalism history emphasizes the dialectic nature of these movements. Although the importance and power of the nation as ongoing force in historical development is recognized, it is treated as 'one among a range of social phenomena to be studied, rather than the frame of the study itself'.<sup>11</sup> The continuous interplay and exchange between the national and transnational level and between processes of territorialization and deterritorialization as such is the subject of study.

Diffusion and transfer are concepts often used to study transnational exchange. Diffusion theory mainly focuses on 'the linear diffusion of a concrete product from the centre to the periphery' in the context of a continuous process of modernization.<sup>12</sup> Svennik Høyer and Horst Pöttker apply it in their account of the triumph of the Anglo-American news paradigm in Germany, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe 'as a component of the great historic process of modernization' in the twentieth century. Although diffusion theory assumes that innovation has ended when diffusion starts, Høyer stresses that diffusion is an interchange in which practice and ideas are adapted to national cultures.<sup>13</sup>

While diffusion seems to presuppose a more or less autonomous and even intangible process hard to pin down to specific moments and actors, transfer emphasizes the intentional use of foreign examples by national agents. It studies diachronic transformation processes in which ideas or practices 'invented' in one country are introduced, transmitted and applied in another. Usually there is only one sender and one recipient and to make the actual transfer clear, the national singularities of the two are sharply distinguished. Transfer studies have an eye for the mediation of knowledge through media and social networks. However,

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Reese, 'Theorizing a Globalized Journalism', in: Martin Löffelholz and David Weaver eds, *Global Journalism Research. Theories, Methods, Findings, Future* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 240-241; Cf. Thomas Hanitzsch, 'Deconstructing Journalism Culture. Toward a Universal Theory', *Communication Theory* 17 (2007), 367-385.

<sup>10</sup> Hepp and Couldry, 'What should comparative media research be comparing?', 40.

<sup>11</sup> Micol Seigel, 'Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn', *Radical Historical Review* 91 (2005), 62-90, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Henk te Velde, 'Political Transfer: An Introduction', *European Review of History – Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 12 (2005), 205-221.

<sup>13</sup> Svennik Høyer and Horst Pöttker (eds), *Diffusion of the News Paradigm 1850-2000* (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2005), 268.

they also run the risk of reducing complex dialectic processes of exchange and reciprocity to the rather straightforward transposition of concrete ideas and practices from one country to another. Transnational journalism history could benefit from the insights of diffusion and transfer studies. It might reveal that what is often called national journalism with distinctive national characteristics is actually the product of various international influences. However, it might be wise to avoid the linearity that transfer and diffusion studies embody and take the more complex hybridization of practices and ideas into account. Current journalism histories tend to ignore this and to interpret transnational exchanges in national terms. By doing so, they fail to explore the potentially fruitful option of researching the dialectics of exchange and making these processes manifest.

### The grand narrative of journalism history

Journalism history is still mainly written in national terms, but I argue that a transnational grand narrative implicitly underlies these national histories. Rooted in Anglo-American journalism and scholarship, this narrative is predetermined by predominantly Anglo-American notions. It views the historical development of journalism as an upward path to press freedom and a civil orientation as a watchdog of public as well as to professional autonomy and the implementation of professional routines and textual forms that are also part of the objectivity regime. This is usually viewed as the professionalization that took off in the late nineteenth century. The fact-centred Anglo-American news style, with formal conventions such as the inverted pyramid, headlines, specific textual genres, and practices such as interviewing and reporting, then became the dominant model for newspapers in democratic societies. This narrative considers the history of journalism a one-way road from advocacy journalism to *high modern* objective journalism, i.e. from views to news.<sup>14</sup> Modernization is a central concept in this analy-

tical framework, mapping the linear progress towards an autonomous profession that empowers citizens and facilitates democracy. In his 1974 article, James Carey calls this dominant paradigm the Whig interpretation of journalism history. Almost twenty years later, James Curran rephrases it as the liberal narrative of media history. He discerns five other narratives in British media history which, however, by criticizing the 'oldest and best established' paradigm, only seem to support and re-establish it.<sup>15</sup> This grand narrative seems omnipresent. In an influential article, media sociologist Jean Chalaby even contends that journalism is an Anglo-American invention.<sup>16</sup> This diminishes the existence and influence of other journalistic styles not centred on news facts and objectivity but on literature, reflection and opinion, which have long been very much alive in European journalism.

The grand narrative of journalism history gives scholars a straightforward model for interpreting the course of history. It is applied and assumed by many scholars, but almost never explicitly argued or explored. In a sense it almost resembles what Judge Potter Stewart said in a 1964 US Supreme Court verdict on pornography. What it is, is hard to define, 'but I know it when I see it...' Scholarship has a teleological as well as a normative focus. What journalism *is* hardly needs to be conceptualized or historicized. It is defined in terms of the liberal narrative and the Anglo-American news paradigm. The outcomes of journalism history are consequently sketched as inevitable and desirable. It has been turned into an almost universal pattern of journalism development whenever and wherever it takes place – a fixed template for national journalism histories.<sup>17</sup>

A dichotomy is created this way that cannot easily be bridged. It limits serious analyses of other styles and forms in their own right because they are excluded from the domain of *journalism* or judged according to the standards of the rising Anglo-American news paradigm instead of in its own terms. As a result, the history of journalism on the European continent is characterized as 'half-hearted' (Norway), 'belated' (Germany) or

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Broersma, 'Form, Style and Narrative Strategies. An Introduction', in: Marcel Broersma ed., *Form and Style in Journalism. European Newspapers and the Representation of News, 1880-2005* (Leuven, Paris and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007), xi-xii; cf. John Nerone, 'Genres of Journalism History', *The Communication Review* 13 (2010), 15-26, 22; Daniel C. Hallin, 'The Passing of the "High Modernism" of American Journalism', *Journal of Communication* 42/3 (1992), 14-25.

<sup>15</sup> Carey, 'The problem of journalism history', 87-88; James Curran, *Media and Power* (London: Routledge, 2002), 4;

Cf. James Curran, 'Narratives of media history revisited', in: Michael Bailey ed., *Narrating Media History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 1-21.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Chalaby, 'Journalism as an Anglo-American Invention. A Comparison of the Development of French and Anglo-American Journalism, 1830s-1920s', *European Journal of Communication* 11 (1996), 303-326.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Mark Hampton, 'Renewing the liberal tradition. The press and public discussion in twentieth-century Britain', in: Bailey, *Narrating Media History*, 26-35.

'controlled' modernization (the Netherlands).<sup>18</sup> It would be more fruitful to focus on the interchange of forms, norms and practices between the 'universal' standards of the Anglo-American paradigm and the national traditions and peculiarities. By carefully studying the transfer of journalistic conventions and routines and examining the processes of cultural adaptation, media historians can prevent their research from being biased by the outcome of this process of 'absorption of Anglo-American practice, style and form' in journalism. Form and style are very useful analytical categories to study at a transnational level. Although the content of an article is unique and incidental, its form is more universal and refers to broader cultural discourses and accepted and widely-used news conventions and routines. The content of news items is bound to their national context, but forms and styles tend to travel internationally. They are intensively transferred from one country to another and adapted to national contexts. This process of cultural diffusion reveals how journalistic conventions and routines are influenced by the culture they function in. Journalism has to appeal to the needs of its audience, at any rate in countries where the press is commercially funded. This makes the study of form and style in journalism pre-eminently transnational and comparative. Comparative research can emphasize the national and cultural peculiarities of journalism and explain differences between the development of journalistic practices, conventions and routines in various countries.<sup>19</sup>

### Future directions for transnational journalism history

In conclusion I would like to suggest seven research themes to be explored by future transnational journalism history. All of them are related to what I consider the most fruitful approach: in line with James Carey's plea for a history of reporting, in my opinion research should focus on the

<sup>18</sup> Svennik Høyer and John Nonseid, 'The Half-hearted Modernisation of Norwegian Journalism', in: Høyer and Pöttker (eds.), *The diffusion of the news paradigm*, 123-136; Jürgen Wilke, 'Belated Modernization. Form and Style in German Journalism, 1880-1980', in: Broersma (ed.), *Form and Style in Journalism*, 47-60; Huub Wijffjes, 'Kontrollierte Modernisierung. Form und Verantwortung im Niederländischen Journalismus 1914-1960', in: Michael Prinz (ed.),

transformation of routines and form conventions. The dialectics of exchange between different types of journalism in one country and between global universals and national peculiarities could thus be critically analyzed.

Media organizations and networks are an obvious first topic for studies of this kind. Very little research has been conducted on formal and informal networks in journalism. The history of international umbrella organizations for national journalists' unions, press clubs and other professional associations, for example the ones that support press freedom world wide, could reveal concrete examples of the transfer of ideas and practices. The same goes for organizations of printers and informal networks of publishers. They arranged internships all across Europe for sons who wished to succeed their fathers as directors of family firms. It would be interesting to know what they learned in foreign companies and what kind of innovations they then applied at home.

Since they were inspirational breeding grounds for journalists from all across the globe, international media companies like press agencies, broadcasting unions or publishers would also be obvious cases for transnational journalism history.

Secondly, a great deal of research can be conducted into transnational public spheres. During the process of European integration, have there been any efforts for example to construct a pan-European public opinion to be formed by a European press corps in overarching media? A history of Brussels correspondents and the press policy of the European Committee and Parliament would be a tremendous contribution to transnational journalism history. A third topic could be the transnational audiences of radio and television broadcasts across national borders. Since they have to balance the journalistic standards of their home country with the expectations and needs of audiences in the countries they target with their programmes, the history of foreign branches of BBC or Radio Free Europe or others like them could provide important insights into the nature of journalism. In

*Gesellschaftlicher Wandel im Jahrhundert der Politik. Nordwestdeutschland in internationalen Vergleich 1920-1960* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2007), 175-196.

<sup>19</sup> Marcel Broersma, 'Journalism as performative discourse. Why form and style matter', in: Verica Rupar ed., *Journalism and Meaning-making: Reading the Newspaper* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2010), 15-35.

line with the above, a fourth strand of research could focus on technology that facilitates transnational communication. Devices like the telegraph, the radio, the Internet and the cell phone each have their own rhetoric that affects news forms of presentation as well as options for the construction of transnational audiences.

At the level of routines, the transfer of norms and ethical standards and national differences in this respect could be a fifth field of study. What is stated in the various national codes of conduct and how does it relate to international agreements like the Code of Bordeaux or the Declaration of Tartu? It would be fascinating to read a study mapping the discussion on ethics at international assemblies of journalists. At the textual level, the study of forms and news flows opens up a sixth and seventh research theme. The coverage of international news events from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century could be studied. It is fascinating to track how newspapers copy each

other and how one or two 'master texts' on a certain event circulate throughout Europe or even worldwide and are adapted in national contexts. The same goes for images and photographs: how are identical images decoded in texts in various countries?

The formal and stylistic characteristics of news are also something that can be explored transnationally. This could enable us to study how journalism developed in the twentieth century from a mainly partisan institution into an independent profession that emphasizes its task as the fourth branch of government. This ideological transformation of journalism expresses itself in stylistic changes and the 'invention' of new journalistic forms. Studying the emergence and historical development of these conventions and the contexts they were used in from a transnational perspective can deepen our understanding of how journalism works.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. the contribution by Frank Harbers and Bas den Herder to this issue. Their paper presents some initial results of a large-scale content analysis of the formal and stylistic characteristics of nine newspapers in France, the UK and the Netherlands from 1880 to 2005. It is part of the NWO/VIDI research project 'Reporting at the

Boundaries of the Public Sphere. Form, Style and Strategy of European Journalism, 1880-2005' currently being carried out under my supervision at the University of Groningen. For more information see: [www.rug.nl/staff/m.j.broersma/projects](http://www.rug.nl/staff/m.j.broersma/projects).