



# Globalisation: Some Home Truths

**“(W)hat we see at present in a very volatile international television regime are globalising, regionalising and localising forces working simultaneously and in overlapping ways. Within this complex system we are addressed at different times as part of a global community, a regional one, a national one and even a local one - on a city or locality-wide basis. So while there are homogenising forces operating in the sense that it is at least theoretically possible for the ‘whole globe’ to tune in to the same broadcast at the same time ..... there are also new indigenising forces at work, as well as new regional television communities being formed by transborder services of various kinds. To see what is happening as an inexorable march towards a homogeneous culture is far too simple.”**

Dr Elizabeth Jacka

*At the recent 1993 Fulbright Symposium (reported in CU 94), Dr Elizabeth Jacka (Macquarie University) gave a paper based on research she is conducting with Dr Stuart Cunningham into global television. Dr Jacka, who is well known for her work on the Australian film industry and on ABC-TV drama, approaches the subject from a cultural perspective. Her views represent an interesting variation from many of the current received wisdoms about the cultural implications of globalism. What follows is a synopsis of this important paper, held over from the last issue because of space pressures.*

‘Globalisation’ is a term much bandied about without much analysis. It is confusing because it can encompass a number of different phenomena, including:

- global media events (Gulf War, Tiananmen Square, Berlin Wall etc)
- global spread of services (Star, CNN etc)
- global media firms (News Corp).

Some of these phenomena are purely economic, some are clearly cultural. For instance the linking of a cross-national or global community to witness an event instantaneously in some sense changes the traditional grounds of personal and group identity.

Globalisation is also inescapably political; for example, when a single global message comes from a single source as in Gulf War coverage, we have to ask what this message includes and leaves out, and why, and in whose interests it is being transmitted.

While globalisation appears to decrease sources of information, at the same time, proliferating new services at a regional level offer possibilities for diversification of sources. In the Asia-Pacific region, globalising forces are potentially liberating. Experience in Europe suggests that as they mature

they will take on a more regional and local character with diminished dependence on US and UK program sources.

## Media Perception of Threats

Much media commentary sees globalisation as something to be feared, because of dangers like threats to national cultural sovereignty; growing domination of international communications by traditional centres of power; reduction in diversity of news and information sources; obliteration of local cultural differences; spread of Western values; and blurring of boundaries between information and entertainment.

But nations are no longer culturally homogeneous, and the media cannot address a uniform audience but must cater for specific groups defined by culture, race, ethnicity, language. The idea of ‘media imperialism’ is undermined by the fracturing of the nation state. Thus the cultural diversity of the United States leads to new links and alliances between elements in US society and in other countries. A Spanish language media community links Spanish Americans, Mexico, parts of Latin America, even Spain itself, and

is the dominant player.

To an international traveller, the world may look increasingly uniform (the same architecture, fashion, consumer brands and so on) but how deep does this appearance of uniformity go?

Language is a crucial factor, and the dominance of English language programming can have homogenising effects. But this is bound to be temporary, and there is potential for, say, the Chinese language to play a similar role in its region as it liberalises its economy and television system.

The arrival of satellite and other new services reaching niche audiences within and across national boundaries means the development of exportable specialised services and programming from sources other than the US and the UK. There is a hunger for programming which domestic production and traditional suppliers cannot meet. All the evidence is that local audiences prefer local programming.

## ‘Global’ a Misnomer

‘Global television’ does not in fact comprehend the whole globe: in parts of the Middle East and Latin America, most of Africa, the Indian sub-continent, China and Indo-China access to

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global television is extremely restricted and confined to elite groups.

And in metropolitan centres of the west, various groups (women, blacks, gays for example) are challenging the power of the media to define them, order their experience, and discipline their behaviour. We describe groups we do not understand in ways which maintain their distance from us. Edward Said has described this process at work in Western reporting of events in the rest of the world, with its resort to terms like 'terrorism' and 'fundamentalism' (key terms of the 1980s) 'derived entirely from the concerns and intellectual factories in metropolitan centres like Washington and London'.

The ability of 'the West' to enforce a particular meaning and set of values as universal is being increasingly challenged from within and without.

## News/Entertainment Blurring

There is a trend to news as drama, news as chat show - 'infotainment'. More news hours are produced and they travel further to bigger audiences, but it is very doubtful whether better news is the result, and whether people globally are better informed.

The avalanche of reporting from Bosnia over the last year shed almost no light on what is actually happening there, or why. The intense preoccupation with personal stories ('triviality') may be related to the 'decline of the West' and to scepticism about over-arching accounts of how the world works, as well as helplessness in the face of global conflicts which viewers do not understand and over which they have no control.

Rather than using terms like 'trivialisation', media professionals and policy makers should consider that people may be trying to find an ordered moral and personal universe in these programs.

Critics have argued that there is an inverse relation between the technological sophistication and speed of transmission of global news production, and its comprehensibility. News becomes story or fable, entertainment becomes news, and the confusion between fiction and reality becomes complete.

The essence of the situation is contradiction - a situation where a tendency to globalisation produces, often in unpredictable ways, opposite, indigenising consequences; where the ability to link people globally and instantaneously produces less rather than more enlightenment. The implications for media news professionals are profound and will take some time to work out. □

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# CIRCIT Bids for New Cultural Body

**In a move which caught many people by surprise, CIRCIT (the Centre for International Research on Communication and Information Technologies) announced at a seminar in early December that it had formally applied to become the home of the Government's proposed Foundation for Australian Cultural Development (FACD).**

This Foundation was announced in the ALP's pre-election arts policy statement, *Distinctly Australian*, under the heading 'Heritage and Cultural Development'. In that document, its broad aim was stated as being 'to stimulate public intellectual life and allow greater engagement of the community in the leadup to the 2001 celebrations', and this would be achieved by working with organisations such as local government, universities and museums.

The FACD is to be based in Melbourne, presumably to counteract longstanding resentment in Melbourne at the location of other key cultural authorities in Sydney. A detailed statement of the proposed role of this foundation is expected to be issued by the Minister soon.

The FACD is to be funded by transferring \$2m from the Australia Council's community cultural development budget and by an additional allocation of \$5.5m, over four years. There has been some concern in the arts community

about the ill-defined role of this new and separate organisation, and the precedent set by hiving off funds from the Australia Council.

In recent years CIRCIT has issued occasional papers on aspects of culture, and late last year held a seminar on *Cultural Industries: National Policies and Global Markets*, but cultural policy is not an area with which it is perceived as having been strongly associated. Its objectives focus on the 'economic and social aspects of information and communications technologies'.

CIRCIT's latest newsletter (5 [9] Nov/Dec 1993) states in its introduction that the issue includes more original analysis than some past newsletters because of the current intensive process of formulation of cultural policy towards a major Federal government statement in March.

CIRCIT's Marcus Breen raises some questions about the FACD which reflect concerns being expressed in the arts community, such as how it will actually differ from existing institutions, and whether there are creators and intellectuals whose interests are not currently being met. Breen concludes that the FACD, while a 'profound policy risk' for the Government, reflects its bold initiative on cultural policy and is a risk worth taking. □