

Hafez, Kai. (2007). The Myth of Media Globalization. Oxford: Polity Press.  
Translation by Alex Skinner. 224 pp.

Globalization has become the term du jour to describe the impact of the ever-increasing connectedness of the modern world. Media forms the backbone of information-based globalization in that it is the conduit through which information flows and cultures interact and examine each other. Through satellite television, improved broadcasting technologies, and the Internet, media outlets in every country now have the technical capacity to reach audiences in every other country of the world. Popular conception holds that media outlets are leveraging this global reach to become globalized entities, where news transcends national boundaries and new media like the Internet offer developing nations equal footing on the global stage. Hafez challenges these assumptions, drawing from a wide range of evidence to suggest that media have, in fact, remained as local enterprises connected by an international network, and that in some ways, the local aspect of news has been reinforced by the broader forces of globalization, rather than reduced.

Hafez opens his book by exploring several of the mechanisms through which information exchange takes place. For example, foreign media may enter a country either through direct import (such as a foreign television show being rebroadcast internally) or through local media interpretation and coverage of foreign events. He uses this dichotomy to make a very critical (and often overlooked) distinction between the news media and the entertainment media. Foreign news and factual information is rarely imported as-is. Rather, its structured nature makes it an ideal candidate for the internalization and recasting mechanisms of the local media in the destination country. Instead of rebroadcasting a foreign news report on events in another country, local media will use those foreign reports to develop their own report, with their own reporting style and framing. Entertainment material, on the other hand, is nearly impossible to subject to such homogenization, and so flows into a country in relatively unmodified form, leading to purer cross-border diffusion. Popular culture may therefore be more readily influenced by the globalization process. Though, as the author points out, many indicators of “globalization of culture” may simply be the work of preexisting internal evolutionary forces, rather than evidence of the influx and diffusion of external influences.

Yet surely there are those media events that bring the world together as one, where the media acts as a cross-national unifying force? As he does to great effect many times in this book, Hafez offers an easily-relatable case study to refute such a notion. The Olympic Games, broadcast live to most countries of the world at the same time, would seem to be the ultimate example of the media acting across borders to bring disparate cultures and nations together. However, as he points out, the reality of Olympics coverage is not a single broadcast received across the world, but rather many “little National Olympics,” (p.26) in which each country uses its own media to focus on its own citizens participating in the game, with much less coverage of other nations’ athletes. Even this potentially unifying event becomes reduced to a reinforcement of national identity and localization, rather than being a flag bearer for the globalization movement.

Instead of a global media system that transcends national borders, Hafez goes on to paint an image of local media systems operating as they always have, but simply with more communication channels connecting them. The fact that it is easy for media outlets to share information, however, does not necessarily mean that they do so, while the sharing that does occur is often mediated by national boundaries in which information becomes interpreted and contextualized at each stage. There is no such thing as a truly “international” news organization: much like any corporation, every media outlet is headquartered in one particular nation. The reporting style, selection criteria, and framing used by that organization across the world is directed by the standards of that home nation, reinforcing the local even at the international scale. Even as CNN is held up as the model of global reporting, the author makes the case that it is simply a reinforcement of American reporting at a global scale.

International media coverage appears to differ little from traditional local coverage: conflict and economic stature appear to play the same mediating selection roles in both. Economic power weighs far more heavily on what nations receive the most news coverage than population, biasing international news flows towards the Western industrialized states, rather than the population-rich developing world. Coverage of non-Western events may even be diminishing as cross-national conflict becomes less significant and wealth centralization continues.

Given the outsized role that the Internet has played in accelerating the pace of international information exchange, and the lofty promise of equalization often associated with it, Hafez dutifully devotes an entire chapter to the phenomena of Internet access and globalization. He addresses this question from several angles, but his core thesis may be best summarized as “access to information is not enough, it must actually be *used* for globalization to take place.” Elites, he argues, are the most significant consumers of this new medium, and they have long utilized each new technological advance to gain greater information about the external world. In this way, the Internet is simply reinforcing the existing role of the elites, rather than empowering the rest of the world. The average citizen can, with the click of a mouse, access news and cultural artifacts from throughout the world, but, according to Hafez, they simply don’t, using this new technology simply to reinforce their focus on local events. More importantly, Hafez equates true globalization with global access. Despite significant advances in Internet technology, the developing world’s access is still severely limited. The existence of large numbers of websites exposing the Western world to foreign culture, for example, is of little consequence to the globalization debate if that exposure is not bidirectional, with citizens on the other side having their own seat at that table.

Overall, Hafez offers a thoroughly useful critique of the interchange of globalization and the media sphere, bolstered by a large body of examples and case studies. Unfortunately, despite the considerable breadth of his charts and figures, the author relies on a limited universe of sources. Rather than tapping into the expansive universe of academic studies on international news flows and leveraging that diversity of approaches and sources, Hafez relies too heavily on a smaller body of literature, especially commercial reports

such as Media Tenor, for certain areas of the book. There is also an abundance of discussion of the impact of perceived media globalization on the developing world, yet a dearth of actual case studies from such nations presenting their side. These criticisms aside, however, Hafez' book is an excellent introduction to the core issues at stake in media globalization and brings together an excellent array of case studies and alternative points of view to make a highly useful contribution to the ongoing discussion on globalization.