

## AFTERWORD

# Media Monitoring: Watching the Watchdogs

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Almost every page of this book invites the reader to reflect upon the role of media, not only in the Iraq war, but in society at large. Regardless of how strongly one shares the perspective of political insanity and even despair exposed in Cees Hamelink's *Preface* and John C. Merrill's response to it in the *Foreword*, one is inspired by such a rich collection of chapters to critically assess the status and tasks of media in the contemporary world.

This *Afterword* leaves it up to each reader to draw conclusions and do further homework in the spirit of critical analysis, which logically follows from all that stands above. Instead, I use the case of the 2003 Iraq War and its coverage to highlight an old idea whose time has really come: systematic monitoring of media performance in matters of global importance. I shall present below first the idea, then its rationale, some concrete examples of its implementation, and finally a proposal to go ahead.

### THE IDEA

The idea of monitoring media performance is a logical extension of the methodological approach in communication research known as content analysis. The classics of content analysis, notably Bernard Berelson and Harold Lasswell, did not introduce the method for its own sake, but as an instrument to *assess* what the media are really doing and to define *policy* for various aspects of social life—including media themselves. It is indeed paradoxical that while content analysis has been a central part of the empiricist and positivist tradition in media

studies, it has also nurtured a policy paradigm, inviting us not only to discover the reality but to change it. This is the paradigm that was already promoted by Max Weber in his legendary speech to the first German congress of sociologists in Frankfurt in 1910 (see Hardt 1979, pp. 174-182).

Historically speaking, we should recall Karl W. Deutsch, the political scientist known for his paradigm of seeing communication as “the nerves of government” (the title of his book in 1963). In the first volume of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* he proposed “an early warning system” to register the amount of media attention given to a conflict area or an enemy country, because “continuing hostile attention in the mass media may tend to harden public opinion to such a degree as eventually to destroy the freedom of choice of the national government concerned” (Deutsch, 1957, p. 202). His idea was “to measure quantitatively the relative shares of attention allotted to particular interstate conflicts and issues in the general flow of news, the extent to which these are retained or forgotten by leaders, and the extent to which they have cumulative effects” (p. 204).

It is interesting to compare this proposal with what we can read in the MacBride Commission’s report:

The primary function of the media is always to inform the public of significant facts, however unpleasant or disturbing they may be. At times of tension, the news consists largely of military moves and statements by political leaders, which give rise to anxiety. But it should not be impossible to reconcile full and truthful reporting with a presentation which reminds readers of the possibility, indeed the necessity, of peaceful solutions to disputes. We live, alas, in an age stained by cruelty, torture, conflict and violence. These are not the natural human condition; they are scourges to be eradicated. We should never resign ourselves to endure passively what can be cured. (*Many Voices, One World*, 1980, p. 177)

Both are outspoken in their normative positions on behalf of peace and against war and violence, but Deutsch’s proposal is more concrete than any of the recommendations by the MacBride report (for a detailed examination of the latter, see Hancock & Hamelink, 1999).

Deutsch’s vision has never been realized, but in these times of Bosnia, etc. in the Balkans, Rwanda, etc. in Central Africa, and the new CNN-type of media diplomacy, it has become ever more topical. The current relevance of the idea is reflected in a recent proposal by Cees Hamelink (1997), suggesting that an International Media Alert System (IMAS) to monitor media content in areas of conflict. “This system would provide an ‘early warning’ where and when media set the climate for crimes against humanity and begin to motivate people to kill others” (p. 38).

Reviewing the history of ideas, we cannot overlook Walter Lippmann, who in 1919 wrote of the idea of a “pseudo-environment” created between people and

the world, largely by mass media and the idea of the “manufacture of consent” as a system of manipulating public opinion (Lippmann, 1995 [1920]). It is clear that recent critical thinking about media performance in books by Herman and Chomsky (1988), Parenti (1993), Hackett and Zhao (1998), and the numerous studies of the Glasgow Media Group (Eldridge, 1995; Philo, 1995; Philo, 1999), build from a relatively long history of attention to media artifice and representation.

Yet we have never before faced conditions in which industrially produced media are such a global presence in every day life and provide such a vast range of people with what Lippmann called the “picture in their heads” of the outside world. The globalization of media not only involves the geographical extension of distribution and transmission, but the homogenization of media forms within a commercial corporate model (Herman & McChesney, 1997). The continued expansion of transnational commercial media, both by means of new technology (especially satellite telecommunications and the Internet) and through the ever-larger scale and longer reach of ownership and control, has extended and accelerated the blurring of classical definitions of news, entertainment, and advertising. The commercial imperative has made “information” a more highly ambiguous term than ever before, as Merrill points out in this book’s Foreword, and the “information industries” encompass media commodities of every stripe.

Media monitoring as an international project is highlighted with over twenty examples in a reader that I initiated in the 1990s (Nordenstreng & Griffin, 1999; referred to below as *IMM*). While the idea builds on modern approaches to content analysis (McQuail, 1992), it implies that the ultimate frame of reference is democracy (cf. Nordenstreng, 2000a). Accordingly, Peter Golding and his colleagues have suggested that the idea is properly designated as “an audit of democracy.” (See their chapter in *IMM*.)

### THE RATIONALE

The idea of media monitoring has a simple four-step logic that proceeds along the following path:

1. Mass media play a vital role in (post)modern societies and in the surrounding global culture, which makes them a backbone of a pervasive cultural environment—the media have *influence*. The assumption is that mass media will continue to be important instruments to address vast audiences and to shape public and private minds at the national and international levels. Contrary to what many today suggest, new media technologies will not bring about an end of mass media and an “end of journalism.” New means and practices will emerge, but the basic characteristics of mass communication will remain and even increase in socio-cultural influence.

2. Mass media, in particular the printed press, enjoy a special constitutional status (based on Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), which protects them from many conventional social policies—the media have *freedom*. This freedom is vital to a democratic society—a safeguard of human rights in civil society. The special constitutional status of the media that provides them with autonomy must be respected and defended as an essential part of the monitoring idea.

3. Mass media not only enjoy an exceptional degree of autonomy, but also carry duties and responsibilities (based on the same international instruments) that call for normative regulation of this sphere of “cultural ecology,” both on legal and ethical levels—the media have *accountability*. It would be both sociologically and politically naive to place media outside of any social control. Accountability can conceptually be divided into various levels and aspects, including law and ethics. The aspect related to the present monitoring idea is focused on an analytical appreciation of media content, thus largely bypassing all the well-known normative and structural aspects, including those media accountability systems that are implemented through professional codes of ethics or media councils (see Nordenstreng, 2000b). Thus, the monitoring idea being pursued here has a limited scope—limited, but still significant, if its potential is fully utilized.

4. Mass media are regulated by legal and financial means to a degree determined by the political balance of power prevailing in each society. There is little the professional and academic community can do about it, but there is an untapped potential for indirect participation in the democratic process of media accountability—through *media criticism*. The media criticism called on here is not the kind of more or less politically motivated interest group advocacy that is well known everywhere. What is meant here is scientifically-based description and assessment of media performance, mainly carried out by methods of content analysis. And the epistemological paradigm is one of conventional realism rather than postmodern phenomenism. Thus, it is assumed that an objective reality exists, and it can be discovered more or less accurately, although in practice the media coverage may be far removed from true reality. In other words, the reasoning typically follows the correspondence theory of truth: comparing media coverage with extra-media data. However, truth checking can be left aside, and monitoring may be focused on tracing the trends and interests of the content alone—the ideological narrative of the media discourse that is customary in cultural studies.

This rationale not only renders support to media monitoring, but it even calls forth, indeed demands, some sort of an institutionalized accountability system. The system would not be a legal or administrative mechanism by official powers (governmental, parliamentary, or judiciary) but something that falls within the non-governmental civil society sphere. However, the system suggested is not another form of straight self-regulation by the media because the content analysis is supposed to be carried out by independent scholars, and the overall media performance is supposed to be assessed by panels that would also be relatively

independent from the media—otherwise the idea of accountability would be missed.

Obviously this is a line that is quite similar to the reasoning of the Hutchins Commission over a half-century ago. The same rationale about social responsibility is more or less shared by a number of later initiatives that do not only reflect narrow academic or social interests, but are indicators of a fundamental tendency in contemporary society to see the ever-larger role played by the media as needing new ways their accountability can be defined and monitored.

Although scientific content analysis constitutes a cornerstone of the media monitoring idea, it does not suggest new, elaborate, and expensive research to be conducted. A lot of content analytical research is already being carried out all over the world—as master’s theses and doctoral dissertations by students, academic contributions by scholars, administrative exercises by authorities, and, in some cases, as international joint ventures. The monitoring idea does not advocate any more such cumbersome projects that tend to consume a lot of mental and material energy, often with marginal outcomes. Instead, it is suggested to pool existing research and to invest energies into digesting accumulated research evidence that already exists.

A host of content analysis exists, especially as case studies, and from such events as the 1991 and 2003 Iraq Wars (see, e.g., Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2000; Kempf & Luostarinen, 2002). There is a huge accumulation of evidence from numerous small and large projects, both national and international. The problem is, however, that these exercises are seldom pooled to facilitate an overall review and assessment of media performance—neither in a single country, nor internationally. If done on a permanent basis such overviews could help identify neglected areas, not only in media coverage, but in studies of media content that too often are based on a haphazard choice of topic and media. In such a manner one could counteract the tendency to end up with abundant piles of disjointed data, and one could also encourage young scholars to focus on content areas that are strategically important, but neglected in the research carried out thus far.

As a matter of fact, much content analysis evidence is lost in the absence of an international system of pooling, accumulating, and comparing data from innumerable national case studies that typically focus on a limited topic or time period. Taken together, such research evidence provides a great potential “to appraise and report annually upon the performance of the press” (as the Hutchins Commission put it). Indeed, a global overview of media performance based on content analysis evidence would help students and scholars in the field to better place their particular problems in an overall perspective. One might also self-critically observe that few fields of science have been as sterile in terms of assessing social and global responsibilities as has been the case with communication research. Where natural scientists are raising their voices

regarding environmental problems, and medical scientists continuously assess problems of human health, communication scientists should have a natural role in taking stock of media performance—not only in isolated cases, but as a global issue.

One might ask why so much attention is paid to content, especially in this time of media concentration and globalization. Is not content just a reflection of structures of production and distribution, ultimately ownership?

The rationale explained here by no means suggests to undermine structural factors behind and beyond media content. It admits that there is a need for similar, indeed parallel, monitoring of media concentration, consumption, and so on. But the rationale is based on a firm belief that mass-mediated content constitutes a strategic part of broader reasoning about the media—their freedom and accountability, and ultimately their role in democracy.

Consequently, the idea is not particularly new or radical. Rather, at issue is a classic question of journalism paradoxically neglected in the prevailing tradition of media theory and practice.

#### THE IMPLEMENTATION

Today it is encouraging to note that many studies and even institutions have emerged with similar objectives. For example, in the United States, “Project Censored” is already more than twenty years old (Jensen, 1997). Sometimes, such monitoring efforts link up with movements for citizen participation or community media production, as in the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) in the United States, or the Media Foundation and its Adbuster programs in Canada.

In the United States, organizations interested in revealing the political biases of news reporting have sprung up across the political spectrum, from Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) on the left, to Accuracy in Media (AIM) on the right. Organizations such as the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, DC, work to maintain a non-partisan image and claim to provide objective scientific analyses of news and media content.

“As the media watch the world, we watch the media” is the motto of *MediaChannel.org*, a New York-based public interest Web site dedicated to global media issues. While its mission follows the rationale and initiatives presented above, its scope goes far beyond simply monitoring media content (see <http://www.mediachannel.org/>). A more content-related agency is Media Tenor—founded in Germany by journalists—to monitor media content trends. Joined by social scientists from Europe and North America, they created a network of nearly two hundred researchers working in five countries with more than ten languages “to provide objective, in-depth, up-to-date media content information to help ensure and protect balanced journalism” (see <http://www.mediatenor.com/>). Buchinger, et al. use Media Tenor material in their

chapter's analysis of African media's coverage of the 2003 Iraq War.

Another impressive indication of the timeliness of the monitoring idea comes from those circles concerned about the representation and portrayal of women in news media. January 18, 1995, was chosen as an "ordinary" news day on which activists in seventy countries were to record the main outlets of newspaper, radio, and television news and codify the stories and people in them, using over twenty common variables (see Margaret Gallagher's chapter in *IMM*). Although this media monitoring was limited to a single day, the number of participating countries makes it still perhaps the largest exercise of comparative content monitoring ever carried out. Participation in this effort was voluntary, which demonstrates how spontaneous interest can be mobilized around a good cause and with the help of an informal network. The exercise was repeated in 2000 with the same partners and enthusiasm, to be followed by another round in 2005—10 years after the first one (see <http://www.wacc.org.uk>).

A genuinely international media monitoring project is shaping up in the European Union around the topic of racism and xenophobia with the establishment in 1998 of the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, based in Vienna, Austria. Its task is to provide the "Community and its Member States with objective, reliable and comparable data at the European level on the phenomena of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism."

The monitoring at issue here is understood quite broadly to cover education and socialization in general, as well as the areas of social and legal policy, but media are also part of its mandate. Therefore it is expected to launch, in collaboration with national institutions (governmental and academic), a permanent system of media performance monitoring in an area so consequential to both the political and economic prospects of Europe. (For an example of this, see [www.multicultural.net/edmm/index.htm](http://www.multicultural.net/edmm/index.htm)).

The global women's monitoring and the European project on race and (in)tolerance show how the idea proposed may materialize thematically instead of as an overall survey, embracing various global issues at one time. Both topics have also been promoted through EU-sponsored reviews of relevant research literature (see *Images of women in the media*, 1999; *Racism and cultural diversity in the mass media*, 2002).

While official initiatives such as the European Monitoring Center take shape, the academic community of media scholars could establish its own global media monitoring system by simply pooling the thousands of case studies being carried out around the world by students and faculty alike. Existing studies already provide a vast potential of evidence regarding specific themes as well as the overall performance of media in society. They need only to be brought together for collective and comparative review.

Obviously, the monitoring of media performance is an idea whose time has come. It does not need any UN or UNESCO resolutions for implementation; it is

evolving quite independently of governmental and intergovernmental structures. Nevertheless, the idea is also being promoted by governmental concerns such as those currently prevailing in Europe in relation to racism and xenophobia.

As a matter of fact, media coverage of race, ethnic minorities, and symptoms of intolerance such as xenophobia has become recognized as a social problem by politicians and professionals alike. It is logical, then, that the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) proceeded in 1994 to establish, with the support of the Council of Europe and the European Union, a working group against racism and xenophobia—something that would have been unthinkable earlier.

The IFJ monitoring project pursued first and foremost in Europe, with highlights such as an international journalism prize for combating racism and xenophobia (sponsored by the European Union). It is supported by a parallel academic project that has grown out of the IAMCR working group on ethnicity, racism, and the media coordinated by Charles Husband, as well as the action program proposed by Teun van Dijk (see their chapters in *IMM*).

Thus, the idea is moving ahead along two tracks: professional and academic. Significantly, there is little or no friction between the two. They seem to support each other, unlike many previous cooperative efforts. Yet there is a recognition that the two should remain distinct to prevent professional journalists from withdrawing their active involvement and turning defensive under the well-known pretext that freedom was being suppressed by outside forces—including the critical intellectual challenge by academics.

#### A PROPOSAL

It is encouraging to see how various actors are already implementing the monitoring idea, and organizations such as Media Channel and Media Tenor have impressively employed the Internet as a tool to make it happen. Nevertheless, a true materialization of the idea needs something more.

It needs a *worldwide network of collaborating scholarly activists*. It needs an *annual review summarizing tendencies within media coverage across the world*, prepared by scholars and eventually elaborated by an authoritative commission that would issue high-profile annual reports. Such a report could, ideally, win the status of the annual reports on media freedom and its violation, issued traditionally by organizations such as the International Press Institute, Article 19, and Reporters Sans Frontiers. In fact, we need a solid and globally representative report on the media content environment, which could be compared with the *State of the World* report on the physical environment, prepared by Worldwatch Institute.

In practice, what is to be done is, first, to set up a network of scholars from all major geopolitical and linguistic regions of the world. Elements of this already



exist in the initiatives reviewed above, but they need to be pulled together into a loose project organization. Although it would mainly operate as a virtual organization through Internet, it also needs physical meetings—at least one for the process to take off. And this will cost money, even if meetings could be organized in connection with other relevant platforms such as academic conventions. Also, material resources are needed for recruiting at least ten core scholars and their eventual stringers, however committed they may be.<sup>1</sup>

Second, once the scholarly network collects the first harvest, an editorial team would prepare a draft report. This can be done in four to six months by three or four colleagues, requiring the resources for about two senior person years.<sup>2</sup>

Third, as an additional vehicle, a high-profile commission could be convened to discuss and issue the report. Such a “guru gallery” would demand a lot of mobilizing and connections, but could be relatively easy to achieve, given the magic (love/hate) appeal that political and business leaders as well as intellectuals hold towards the media.<sup>3</sup>

This scenario suggests a two-year pilot project, which could be launched at any time. All that is needed is a core group of committed operators and the necessary material means (less than \$1 million U.S. dollars in total).

This book is a perfect case to demonstrate the usefulness of a truly global media monitoring project. Why not take this as a decisive push and establish the system, based on this and other studies on media coverage of recent wars, moving on from there to the role of media in dealing with other global problems.

#### ENDNOTES

1. The cost of all this would be at the level of \$500,000 U.S.
2. This would cost about \$200,000 U.S.
3. This could be achieved with about \$200,000 U.S.

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