

Andreas Hepp

Translocal Media Cultures: Networks of the Media and Globalisation

The main argument of this article is that the concepts of (global) connectivity, networks and flows offer a chance for rethinking international and intercultural research. Recent work on globalisation in sociology as well as media and communication studies tends to culminate in the argument that globalisation is best understood as the process of an increasing, multidimensional worldwide connectivity. If we accept such claims as correct, we are confronted with one problem: how can we theorise media cultures, their differences and diversity as part of the global connectivity? Based on present academic discussion, I argue that there have to be at least two perspectives in which such an undertaking can be accomplished. On the one hand there is the structuring aspect of globalisation which can be related to the already mentioned term 'network', on the other hand it is the processing aspect of globalisation which can be related to the term 'flow'. Both perspectives offer appropriate and complementary concepts for theorising the differences and diversity of media cultures: they offer the chance to theorise media cultures as 'translocal thickenings' or 'amalgamations'. This way of thinking allows a more concrete understanding of media cultures and their diversity in a new way.

1 Introduction

The aim of my article is to substantiate the following thesis: 'Connectivity', 'network' and 'flow' are concepts which help us to develop a methodology that is especially appropriate for investigations focusing on questions of globalisation within media and cultural studies. With these concepts it becomes possible to theorise media cultures in times of globalisation, not because they are 'universal' but because they allow a self-reflexive way of thinking about present cultural forms.

To support this thesis, I want to put forward a two step argument. First, I will comment on the concepts of (global) connectivity, networks and flows. Taking these reflections as a starting point, I will then develop a theoretical framework for the critical analysis of translocal media cultures.

2 Global Connectivity, Networks and Flows

Recent work on globalisation in sociology, cultural studies, as well as media and communication studies tends to culminate in the argument that globalisation is best understood as the meta process of an increasing, multidimensional worldwide connectivity (cf. Hepp 2006b). This formulation seeks to conjoin at least three different arguments: In the first place, if we understand globalisation as a "meta process" (Krotz 2006), this indicates that the concept 'globalisation' does not designate something we could 'observe' in the sense that it is an 'empirical object' which can be situated in a specific context. Rather, 'globalisation' is a theoretical concept like 'individualisation' or 'commercialisation' which helps us to understand contradictory sub processes as a whole.

In the second place, this process is "multidimensional" (Giddens 1990: 70; Tomlinson 1999: 13). This indicates that globalisation operates on different 'process levels' or 'scapes'. Whatever concept of globalisation we rest upon here, the different arguments meet in the point that globalisation

cannot be reduced to one 'main dimension' (for example the economic one) which determines the others. The different sub processes of globalisation seem to have their own 'logic' or 'forces' that have to be conceptualised before relations between them can be understood. Nevertheless there seem to be many relations between the different 'process levels', their "disjuncture" (Appadurai 1996: 27) is relative.

This refers to the third point which is associated with the term 'connectivity'. In the arguments of John Tomlinson (Tomlinson 1999: 3–10), the term 'connectivity' indicates a wariness of what we can conclude from the meta process we call globalisation: While early work on that topic had the tendency to argue that globalisation might imply an increasing global standardisation, homogenisation, a kind of "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 1998) or – in short – a "global culture" (Featherstone 1990), we now know that cultural proximity *can* be one result of globalisation in specific contexts. But also processes of increasing conflicts, misunderstandings and cultural fractions are part of globalisation: "globalisation divides as much as it unites; it divides as it unites" (Bauman 1998: 3). This is especially a central argument in the field of media communication: an increasing communicative connectivity does not bring people inevitably together – as Marshal McLuhan's utopian idea of the global village has outlined (cf. McLuhan and Fiore 1968) – and has not a 'worldwide Americanisation' as an unquestioned result. Rather the increasing worldwide media connectivity indicates, on the quantitative level, a high number of ongoing communicative processes. These processes have a very different character when seen from a qualitative point of view. We must analyse in detail what the consequences of media globalisation are, by focusing on specific processes within specific contexts.

Up to this my arguments bind together present academic thinking on globalisation. Altogether one can say that the globalisation of media communication is one dimension of

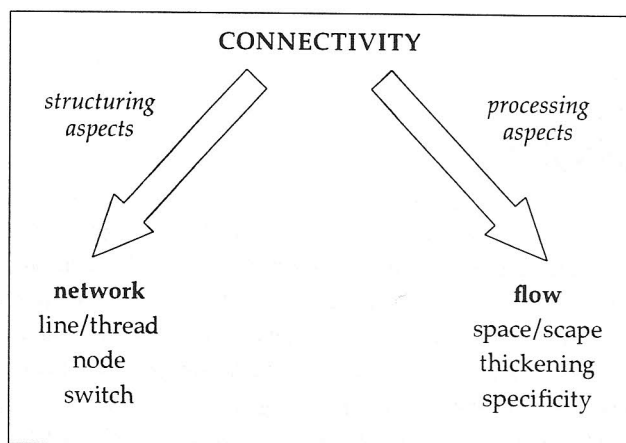


Figure 1: Theorising Global Connectivity

the meta process of globalisation and this dimension is best understood as an increasing communicative connectivity. But how can we theorise this global connectivity? It seems that there are at least two perspectives in which such an undertaking can be done. First of all, there is the perspective of the *structuring* aspect of globalisation that can be related to the already mentioned term 'network', secondly, it is the *processing* aspect of globalisation that can be related to the term 'flow' (see figure 1). It seems to me that it is important to keep both aspects in mind when we discuss questions of globalisation.

2.1 Networks: Structuring Aspects

The term 'network' offers a clear view of the structuring forces of globalisation. To make this comprehensible, I want to quote Manuel Castells definition of 'network' which meets with many others. For Castells networks are

"open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for example, values or performance goals)" (Castells 1996: 501).

This quote clarifies some of the important aspects of 'theorising networks'. In a specific sense, it is tautological to argue that networks consist of connections ('links', 'threads', 'curves' and so on) which are woven at nodes. This is just a description of a network as an everyday metaphor. But in recent theory, these terms have been loaded with specific meanings. It is increasingly obvious that the connectivity of a network is constituted along a specific 'code'. 'Structures' of (social) networks are not just there, but reproduced in an ongoing contextualised process. This for example makes it possible that one and the same person may be part of different networks: they can be part of the network of friends (where a specific kind of social relation might be the 'dominant code'), and they can be part of the network of a social movement (where specific cultural val-

ues and political aims are the 'dominant code'). This seems to be the reason why network structures are so open and the borders of networks are so blurred, while nevertheless working as structuring forces: A network of friends places demands on us, just as our political engagement in a social movement closes other opportunities for political action.

These remarks help to theorise what we can understand by the term 'nodes'. At a neutral level one can say a node is the point where the connection ('ties', 'links', 'threads', 'curves' and so on) of a network traverses itself. From an initial perspective, formulations like this seem to be irritating; nevertheless they help us to understand the important point that 'nodes' within network structures can be completely different things. We can understand communication as a process of establishing a specific kind of connectivity, in which the speaking persons are the main 'nodes'. But 'nodes' can also have other social forms. For example, we can describe local groups as 'nodes' in the network of a wider social movement, or we can understand organisations like local companies as 'nodes' in a wider corporation network. 'Network structures' can be seen on completely different levels; and that is the reason why the concept offers the chance to describe and compare structuring powers *across* these different levels.

A third term that seems to be important when discussing the structural aspect of global connectivity is the term 'switch'. Again, it was Manuel Castells who introduced this term in the academic discussion. For Castells, a 'switch' is a specific kind of node which links different networks. The term 'switch' refers to the idea that this node must be able to 'switch' the code of one network into the code of another. To make this clearer, it will help to have a look at the nodes Castells describes as switches. The examples he focuses on in this context are the networks of capital, information and decision making (see Castells 2000: 502). Their different structures are 'linked' via specific 'switches' – in these cases located in so-called global cities. 'Switches' are in this sense the location where central aspects of power are concentrated in network structures, and this idea opens an additional aspect of analysing power relations within (global) networks: While power relations are rooted in the totality of social networks – as Michel Foucault has pointed out (Foucault 1996: 43) –, the concept of the 'switch' helps us to understand where power relations are concentrated in networks, at the position where different networks interact.

The 'network thinking' that I have outlined offers a way of describing structural aspects of connectivity which explains the paradox of the 'openness' and 'closeness' of connectivity. On the one hand, the structures of networks are open in the sense that networks can (more or less) easily integrate new nodes and grow without losing their 'stability'. With this in mind, networks are 'open'. On the other hand,

