

# The selection of foreign news A case study of Danish news rooms \*

By  
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The focus in this article is on the question of how globalization has affected the scope of action of editorial choice focussing on our three main parameters: Media policy, Editorial structure and Journalistic self conception.

The empirical sample consists of participants observations at 5 newspapers, two TV stations and the main Danish radio station. For each organization we have closely followed the work from early morning to late evening, and systematically recorded arguments used during the selection. Journalists and editors have been interviewed as they were making choices as to why they made the selection they did. All of the arguments have then been recorded and categorized (Holm, 2000:8). The interviews have been conducted in a "normal news period" with several international stories, but no one major story dominating everything. In addition a study of the foreign news output was done. Here foreign news, according to a broad definition of foreign news, was collected for all major Danish media for the same two week period. All the major papers and both national radio and TV was covered. The result was a data sample of 2480 stories. Finally information was collected on the organizational structure of the media and the newsroom structure. (1)

The data set is unique in that we for the same time period has information on both media structure, editorial structure, the professional norms as they relate to the choice of story, and data for the choice that is made and published.

Is globalization affecting this process? How and to what extent? And what is globalization? A few words on the latter question will have to suffice here.

Globalization is hardly understudied. Indeed, most media studies these days all seem to relate to aspects of the process and the effects of globalization. The reasons are simple. Globalization has become such a highly visible process after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Released by those two factors, but not created by them, many domestic, societal phenomena now seem to have global import. Political ideas, economic events and communication spread much more easily now than before. We all seem to be affected by changes in other economies,

political systems and cultures. The effects of globalization seems to be visible for all.

In fact, globalization seems to be so ever present that it has become very difficult to arrive at a common definition, and consequently to understand and even study its effects. Three central problems stand out. First: Globalization is both the cause of other things e.g. homogenization or differentiation and globalization is itself an effect of e.g. economic interdependencies. Secondly globalization is such a pervasive and shifting phenomena that identifying the conjunction of events, processes and conditions that it is composed of is difficult . Finally, there has been a tendency to see globalization as all pervasive, and thereby overestimate the effects.

In the study of globalization and the media there has been an almost exclusive attention on the effects of globalization on media structures. The process is seen as a result of integration of the media industries. “ The process of globalization is very much a function of increasing corporate integration” (Morley and Robbins, 1995:32) Through this process of integration content is changed and some countries are able to define the world and others have their “history stolen”. Globalization thus has direct consequences for the identity of peoples and the media and news agencies become unwilling partners in this process (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen, 1998:11). Globalization is part of a news revolution claims Mark Alleyne (Alleyne, 1997:137). A global news system has been created because of democratic and economic necessities.

Surprisingly very little attention has so far been paid to the links between globalization and journalistic practices. This study aims to redress this imbalance.

In order to be able to study such a complex phenomena we need a limiting definition of globalization that will allow us to see the wider context, but not get bogged down in a teleological or normative debates on cosmopolitanism versus realism or methodological debate on cause and effect interaction (Giddens, 1996; Hirst and Thompson 1992; Fukuyama 1999)

In this study I will focus on globalization as consisting of two elements: Structural and technological:

1. Globalization is at its core an economic process of economic integration and interdependencies. It is a transformative intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across borders (Holm and Sørensen, 1995; Jackson 1999; Held and McGrew 1999)
2. As discussed, it is also a process of technological change in particular in the field of communication technology whereby the technological means for instant global communication are created and utilized (Bornschiefer and Chase-Dunn, 1999; Taylor 1997)

This article offers three conclusions.(1)

1. Globalization has had a profound impact at the level of media structure and media policy and resulting changes in media content are visible.
2. Globalization has made an impact on the internal editorial structure of media organizations in terms of foreign news. This impact is less than at the level of media structure and policy, but clearly observable.
3. Globalization has so far made little impact on the level of journalistic practices and news criteria as they are employed in the Danish editorial process when foreign news is selected.

Globalization is influencing the foreign news process from the top down. The effects are most clearly seen at the structural levels. At the level of journalistic practices and norms there is still little evidence of the effects of globalization.

## A Model for the study of editorial choice:

The choice of what news to publish is the result of a process of decision making whereby thousands of possible stories, events and units of information are culled down to the few stories that are actually published. The scope of choice in this process looks very different depending upon your choice of perspective.

When looking at the selection process from outside it is stressed that the media, as independent units, have the freedom to pick what ever stories they want. They may choose more or less stories from US, they may choose more or less reporting about the last hurricane. Critics have often stressed the opportunities for the media to choose differently. Many of the studies of the media content employ this perspective. Studies of the coverage of Africa, for example, lament that not more news on Africa is published(Eldrige, 1993)

Seen from the inside most journalists and editors perceive the selection process as much more restricted. “ The selection is self evident today” was a common phrase we encountered when discussing the selection process with the editors. Their point is that by applying the traditional news criteria to the agency reports there is little doubt about what to choose. The classical news criteria determine the choices: Is it new? Is it prominent? Is it significant? Is it controversial? (Moeller, 1999:17). The more criteria that are satisfied the more obvious it is that the story is chosen.

Is there a large scope of choice in the editorial process or not? Are the journalists right when they claim that news selection is almost automatic, or are the outside analysts correct in stressing the possibilities of choosing differently? The answer lies in understanding the entire process of

newsproduction. The final choice that the journalists and editors are making in the editorial process is the end point of a long process, where most of the “choices” have been made already. Tuchman’s studies showed how the production of meaning in society is itself a factor in the choice of news (Tuchman 1978: 215). Studies of the international news agencies have shown how concentration and homogeneity in perspective confines news agencies coverage to a small and similar selection of the news (Paterson, 1998:95). Figure 1, highlights how the daily choice is predetermined and affected by central outside factors.

There is a vast literature on these news processes and here the focus is firstly on the effect of globalization. (Ginneken 1998; Willis 1990) Secondly we have chosen to focus on three important steps in the news process where editorial choice is affected:

1. Media structure and policy. The degree of government regulation of print and electronic media strongly affects both the utilization of technology and the degree of competition and concentration in the industry (Williams, 1998). It has been clearly documented that it makes a difference to choice of stories if the media is wholly commercial or not (Hjarvard 1999).
2. Editorial Structure: How is news and foreign news production organized. Is foreign news a separate unit or integrated into other departments. How many correspondents and staff members are available. What sources are made available to the reporter etc.
3. Journalistic standards and professional values: Particular norms for what is good and bad reporting have been developed within the journalistic professions and within foreign news. Criteria for what is news determine which stories are important and essential. These criteria have become part of the professional norms of people in the business.

Figure 1 here

A: Media structure and policy. That technological changes and economic integration has affected media policy is well described and need not elaboration here. (2) Technology has profoundly affected the regulatory possibilities of governments. The Danish government tried in the 80ties, in vain, to maintain a ban on satellite reception. In some instances the police was sent out to cut wires from illegal satellite dishes. A policy that obviously could not be maintained, but illustrated the political desire to keep electronic media under control. Other governments have struggled with unwanted television that is beamed in from other countries, as was the case with the “Red Hot Dutch” porno channel. Technology has, however, also opened up new venues for governments. The internet

provides the government with possibilities of *bypassing* the media by offering the public direct access to news and documentation(Hutchinson 1999). Both because of difficulties in controlling and with a view to the new possibilities offered by new technologies, governments have deregulated the electronic media and introduced market mechanisms into the halls of public service stations (Stephenson and Bromley, 1999).

Economic integration has had independent effects in several ways on media policy. It has pushed the media business towards larger and larger units, due to the degree of internationalization. In countries like Denmark where legislation makes foreign ownership difficult local TV has become the targets of media multinationals. SBS (Scandinavian Broadcasting System) a US based media company, now own or service local TV stations in Denmark and a number of smaller European countries. In the world of print media, local papers all over Europe are disappearing and national papers are consolidating into larger media houses locked in intense battle with each other over readerships and advertising.

Media policy in the last ten years has largely played the role of refereeing these changes. In some countries press support is still a factor in maintaining the life of smaller papers, but this is the exception. At the European level, discussions on European regulation of concentration, transmedia ownership are ongoing, but so far little action has been taken.

Globalization has had two distinct effects on the media structure in Denmark(3) In terms of TV, it has led to a rapid deregulation of state control, and created a multitude of new channels and alternative news programs for the public. In terms of the printed media, the increased costs of newspaper production has forced a wave of mergers and consolidations. The newspapers are, however, larger and more professionalised, than before the process of consolidation. The overall result is a dramatic increase in the competition among all types of media for advertising revenue and for viewers and readers.

Evidently the process of editorial choice has been affected. Considerations of reader and viewer interests are pushed to the forefront. Foreign news editors have to demonstrate that more than a small elite are interested in foreign news. How the story is told becomes an even more important consideration. Foreign news has to be dramatic and easily accessible. For better and for worse foreign news must be linked to what is readily accessible.

In addition the need for each media to differentiate itself from others become an important concern in selecting and presenting the news. One Danish paper has successfully rebranded itself as an international paper, and has used this as a circulation booster. Another paper has defined a foreign news profile with special emphasis on human rights coverage (Holm 2000: 104).

B: Globalization and editorial structure:

Foreign news desks have traditionally been very separate units within news organizations.

Firstly, the technology created a need for a separate unit. Expensive and cumbersome telex machines or expensive international phone lines were necessary. Just ten years ago, most editorial offices still relied on the row of constantly tickering machines with their endless streams of white paper. Today everyone in a news organization can have access on the screen to the international news feeds by the touch of a button. Communication costs but in terms of phone or satellite transmissions have decreased markedly.

Secondly, foreign news departments were staffed with people with special types of qualifications and interests. They had to know foreign languages. Travel was a necessity, and significant journalistic experience a must. Today the majority of news is available in English, and many journalists today have some ability in English. Travel has become relatively easy and cheaper. There seems less need to have a very special group of people in the newsroom dedicated to foreign news.

Finally, foreign news used to be a sharply defined field. Foreign news was about political and economic events in foreign countries. In particular the events that related to the foreign policy of these countries, and in particular as it relates to or had consequences for our country. International news was to a large extent diplomatic news. Although we only have data for 1998, the conclusions are based on the existing research about how foreign news used to be structured and defined (Taylor, 1997:58-75). Today foreign news has become global news. Economic events now play as much of a role in foreign reporting as does politics. In addition, descriptions of culture or sports or conditions of life in general are now gaining prominence as part of the reporting. Here globalization is very clearly visible. In many news organizations they have dropped the name-foreign department and changed to global or international department. Correspondents have to report on many different aspects of life in the countries they are reporting from. They write for many different sections of the newspaper.

In our study of foreign news content these changes showed up very clearly. In table 1 subjects have been divided into “traditional” and “non traditional” foreign news. See table 1.

**Table 1: Subjects of International Coverage (Nov 1998) in Danish Media in pct.**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Newspapers</b>	<b>Electronic media</b>
<b>Traditional</b>	58	76.7
<b>National eco+pol.</b>	26	43
<b>Internat. politics</b>	11	20
<b>European union</b>	7	6

<b>Internat. economics</b>	4	0.2
<b>Danish foreign policy</b>	2	1
<b>War</b>	2	0.5
<b>Aid</b>	4	3
<b>Disasters</b>	2	3
<i>Non traditional</i>	42	23.3
<i>Culture+lifestyle</i>	10	1
<i>Person stories</i>	6	4
<i>Human rights</i>	6	5
<i>Environment</i>	4	3
<i>Business</i>	4	3
<i>Social subects</i>	4	5
<i>Historical</i>	4	1
<i>Adventure</i>	2	1
<i>Curiosities</i>	2	0.3
total	100	100

In the electronic media (Radio in particular) “traditional “ subjects still dominate. Part of the reason is that they have a smaller number of stories, and therefore go through a more rigorous selection process. In newspapers almost half of the stories are now “nontraditional” stories.

Globalization is changing the editorial structure of the foreign news desks, but it is worth noting that this is a recent and ongoing process. Our study of the structure of the Danish newsrooms today showed that changes were being discussed, but few were in fact implemented.

Within DR, the traditional public service radio and TV broadcaster, a plan has been drawn up by management to demand “bi-medial” production of foreign correspondents and to merge radio and TV news departments. So far this has created a great deal of controversy and it remains to be seen if this will lead to the creation of a larger and more separate foreign news department or lead to the kind of integration within the general newsroom that is envisioned by management.

In the print media, several of the newspapers have been experimenting with news editorial structures. The separate foreign news department is less separate today. In one Danish newspaper(Politiken) the Brussels office now has a rotating domestic reporter. The political reporters get a feel for foreign reporting, and domestic concerns are present on the foreign desk. In other papers, the business section of the paper and the foreign desk share offices and editors(Jyllands-Posten). Integration is made easier by the fact the foreign reporters are younger and less experienced today. The young journalist is cheaper, and more willing to cover the multitude of subjects that a foreign reporter has to work on today.

### C: Globalization and journalistic norms and self conceptions.

The importance of professional norms for news production has been amply documented in the literature. The standardization of international news is in fact explained by the “globally defined implicit journalistic codes for the production of news” (van Dijk, 1988:131).

The market driven nature of modern media and the intense pressure on journalists to deliver sellable products are affecting overall news content and foreign news production. Journalists and editors lament that stories on TV become shorter and shorter. Print journalists feel that they are asked to cover so many different things that it becomes very hard to be thorough, hard hitting and critical.

Surveys demonstrate that the trust in journalists is continuously low and among the lowest of all professions surveyed.(4) Data from the United States show that journalists themselves share this lack of trust in their colleges. 40-55 percent agree with the criticism that news reporting is full of factual errors and sloppy reporting. This is up 10 points in a ten year period. Almost two thirds of journalists and reporters say that the distinction between reporting and commentary has seriously eroded(Pew 1999).

When asked, journalists and editors explain the erosion of trust by the increased use of sensationalism and emotionality as criteria for news selection. No surprise then that journalists tend to adhere to traditional norms of news gathering and reporting when asked to describe what they do in the news selection process. The traditional news criteria are still the dominant arguments used in selection of foreign news.

But the editorial selection process is changing. More nontraditional subjects have to be covered and it is becoming harder to pick the boring but important story(Graham Holm 1999:42). Many journalists express a reluctant awareness of the fact that the roles of the journalist is changing rapidly as a consequence of globalization. No longer is he/she the only purveyor of foreign news. There is now a large number of sources to pick from, ranging from the internet to international 24 hour news channels. Consequently, it is difficult to be first, and it is even harder to have an exclusive. The journalist becomes a news organizer and one that must tell the story in a better or more relevant way for his audience.

Journalists however, acutely feel pressured toward the more sensational and person oriented story selection(Holm 2000:195).

In our survey the print media had 6 pct of the foreign news stories categorized as “person” stories. In the electronic media it was 3.3 pct. Stories categorized as odd or curious were 1.3 and 1.4 pct respectively. These are not large figures, but in the coverage of stories about celebrities, journalists feel caught in the need to tell stories that have large audiences rather than telling what they themselves define as important stories.

## Editorial choice

Will we be able to detect the effects of these different limitations on editorial choice when studying the arguments used for selecting or not selecting stories as part of the daily editorial choice process? Does globalization reach down and effect the daily choice?

In the following, an analysis is presented of the arguments used for story selection. Specifically, how much these arguments reflect consideration related to editorial structural (“We want this story because we at this paper place a priority on transnational stories” “ the correspondent was too busy, so we can’t have that story”).

How important are arguments that reflect journalistic norms and self conceptions (“ It is a well told story” “ It is an important story”). Finally, arguments reflecting increased media competition are examined (“ we need to “tease” a program later on tonight”., “TV2 had the story so we won’t”).

**Table 2: Editorial arguments for selection or rejection of stories**

	Arguments N =223	Pct. of total=100
<b>Media structure/ competition</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Editorial structure</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Journalistic self conception/ news criteria</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>65</b>
Timeliness	44	20
Importance	45	20
Conflict	9	4
Sensation	24	11
Identification	23	10

Two things stand out very clearly from the figures in the table:

1. The classical news criteria are still by far the most influential arguments used in the selection of foreign news.
2. More than a third of arguments used reflect other considerations than news content.

We don’t have data on how this may have changed over time, but it is interesting to compare these findings with some of the previous gate

keeping studies done. A study of the criteria of American newspaper editors used in selecting of foreign news revealed that “most editors appear to focus more on factors having significant impact or consequences, especially when American security and national interest are involved.” The study also pointed out that individual differences (political orientation) and organizational constraints in the newsroom were important when shaping editors perceptions of foreign news factors(Chang and Lee 1992: 554-561).

Previous studies of the gatekeeper function demonstrated that the gatekeepers tend to choose stories from the news agencies in ways that have changed surprisingly little from the first study done in 1949 to the second in 1989.(5)

“Newspaper gatekeepers read and asses about 1000 stories a week. They are usually experienced journalists who have spent many years reading news stories sent by the wire services, which in turn have gatekeepers with similar experiences. Gatekeepers tend to select news by being gatekeepers. As a group gatekeepers – to do and keep their job-share high exposure, acceptance, and comprehension of the same media messages every day.”(Bleske1991:92)  
News is selected in very predictable ways. This has changed very little.

Our study indicated that as much as third of arguments related to other considerations than the news. In a study of community and regional newspaper gatekeepers the questions of the impact of editorial structure and organizational constraints were specifically examined. The data is from the US and from 1989 and comparison should be done with great care. The data showed that the dominant “concerns for decisions you make on your paper” both on small papers and on large daily news were editorial concerns. Concern over advertising was more a concern for the smaller papers whereas production and circulation were bigger concerns for the big regional papers. The data point in the same direction as our results. For example in the American study, 19 pct of editors mentioned “organizational problems” as the “major concerns” on their paper(Donohue et al, 1989: 807-812).

It seems reasonable to conclude that despite the changes being introduced through the process of globalization so far the actual news selection has changed relatively little.

However our interviews show that we are in the midst of process of change and that in fact the figures obscure that change is ripe. In order to look closer at that we need to examine in more details the nature of the arguments used in the news selection process.

As evident from the table only 7 percent of the arguments were directly related to the Media structure/competition. For example in our study of the TV editorial process we found that stories were rejected because the other channel already had that story (The story was about an international environmental conference and the issues were whether to cover it or not. Since the other channel already had a planned segment on the Danish

angle the first channels declined to select the story. The importance of the story was not in question).

A large number of the arguments in this category relate to the question of getting the right mix of news every day. The media would like to highlight its own stories to achieve higher reader/ viewer identification. Therefore stories that you have planned on your own are given priority. The journalists will be more visible in the story and the story might even be presented in identifiable ways as “one of our own stories”.

In the selection of stories the right mix is also important. There should be a more humorous or soft story included every day. “ we want this because it enlivens the page and has the humor that is necessary for the mix”. “This story is a curious one and it contributes to creating a good mix”. Arguments like these reflect that editorial choice is influenced by the competitive pressures. It is important to “lure” people into the foreign news. During the coverage of the hurricane Mitch, the TV news editor wanted something lighter to spice up the broadcast and got a story about alligators that had escaped from an crocodile farm and now were swimming in the rivers in Honduras. This was used as the last story of the news broadcasts, with a short intro and as background for the credit roll.

29 percent of all arguments referred to organizational structure, staffing issues etc(editorial structure): “The correspondents are very tired and have been working hard”. Moscow doesn’t want to produce more stories because he already has three stories that haven’t been used.” “ We cant get the people in the graphics department to do it today and the story needs graphics”.

Some arguments reflected considerations of picture coverage. A good picture can put a story in, even if the story is not that important. No pictures can kill a good story. How the story is told is also an important consideration in its own right.

The predominant arguments for story editing come from the category of journalistic self conception/ news criteria. Table 2 shows that 64 percent of arguments are related to this category. Of these arguments, the most important are “ Timeliness” and “Importance”. 40 percent of all arguments related to this: “ This is an important story” “ This just came in”. “We have to go with this story, it may affect a lot of people.” These arguments are journalistic standard arguments, and reflect a core understanding of what journalism is all about: The reporting of important events. They may in part also be standard arguments used for any story that the gatekeeper finds relevant, but never the less there seems to be agreement on what these stories are. When we looked at the stories that were selected as the top foreign news stories in the different editorial offices about 80 percent of the stories were the same stories. The classical hard nosed news criteria are strongly internalized and mutually reinforced by looking at the selection that others do. The mainstreaming of news is the inevitable result.

As much as 20 percent of the arguments refer to receiver identification or sensationalism.

“ It is very exotic and so far away that it is interesting” “ because it is a story of the type dog bites man”(in reference to a story about a south African priest who turns out to be a crook). The coverage of both Diana and the Lewinsky stories were clear reflections of these. One editor argued “ Everything about Lewinsky is good stuff just like the Diana stories”. Identification is also the reason used for using a Danish angle in stories. Particularly among editors and reporters on radio this was an often used argument. “ There is a Danish angle”. “ It is important for Denmark “. “ There is a demonstration about this issue in Copenhagen”.

However, the majority of the arguments come from the conviction that what is essential news must have priority. “ This is an important story”. “ This has regional significance” “ This fuels further nationalism” “This will be one of the main problems for the future” etc. etc.

Examining the arguments supports two conclusions. Classical news criteria are still the best predictor of what news will be chosen and used. The range of arguments used today reflect that other concerns are becoming accepted into the newsroom. Whether one interprets these results as indications of professional consistency over time or of impending change is, in the absence of clear longitudinal data, more a matter of conviction than of science.

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## Conclusion:

Globalization affects media structures and has totally restructured the environment in which foreign news is selected. Today foreign news must leave the old ivory tower of intellectual and elite journalism and confront the diverse needs of the modern media market.

“The traditional media will lose even more of their role as mediators between events and the public. In short, the force that was instrumental in bringing down the Berlin Wall is likely to bring down many walls in our own country”(Grunwald, 1993:16).

The rapid technological changes create a global market for foreign news and information. There is today no monopoly on “reporting from Tokyo”. Future developments of “news on demand” will place foreign news on par with all other types of news that may be selected, or unselected at will.

Globalization is itself transforming politics and creating new transnational audiences and means of communication. The political reality is there and the media must and will follow.

Our study of the process of editorial choice shows how the transformations have been clearly visible on the level of media structure and competition. It has had and is having clear effects for the present restructuring of newsrooms. Foreign departments are changing and blending into other departments in the editorial offices. The foreign news status as a special sanctuary is eroding. As Garric Utley points out: “Today everyone is a reporter “. Equipped with simple camcorders and computers everyone can send video and stories everywhere(Utley 1997:9).

In the actual selection of news, however, the traditional news criteria still stand. Seen in a longer time perspective the selection of foreign news is still to a large extent dominated by the classical journalistic norms and the traditional news criteria.

#### Endnotes:

\* An earlier version of some of the data is being published in a collection of seminar papers from Copenhagen University.

(1)The following is based on research undertaken by a research group at the Centre for Journalism and Further Education where a detailed survey of the foreign news coverage in the Danish media was undertaken. Based on a two week period (Nov 11-Nov. 24 1998) all foreign news (in a broad sense) in 9 newspapers, two TV stations and the national radio network was collected. In addition, a study of the organizational structure of each of the news organizations was conducted. Finally, observation of the editorial process at seven of the major media was conducted with a specific focus on the process of editorial choice (Holm, 2000).

(2)The Danish Government created a Media Committee in 1994 to review media policy in terms of access, quality and freedom of information. The result of the work was a series of reports (Medieudvalget 1996).

(3) This discussion excludes the interesting and essential debate on the effects of globalization in a wider framework i.a. cultural dependency and homogeneity(Hjarvard, 1996).

(4) The latest figures from Denmark show that only 1 percent of the population think that journalists have high credibility. It is the lowest ranking of all the evaluated professions(October 1999).

(5) David Manning White wrote in 1950 the classical study “ The “GateKeeper”. A Case Study in the Selection of News(White 1950: 383-396). The study was replicated and updated in a study called “Ms. Gates takes over. An Updated Version of a 1949 Case Study” (Bleske 1991:88-97).

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**Figure 1: A model of factors influencing the process of the daily news choice in foreign news**

