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Ed Turner
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Reflections on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Communications Act

Ed Turner*

In August 1991, President George Bush was in the White House, watching the attempted take over of the Russian government as telecast on CNN. According to press secretary Marlin Fitzwater, Bush called Russian President Boris Yeltsin after he saw the beleaguered chief of state on a tank in Parliament Square near the Kremlin. Yeltsin was urging the crowd to support his opposition to the coup. When he got Yeltsin on the phone, President Bush asked what he could do to help. Yeltsin told him to go on CNN and ask other western leaders to speak out against this attempt to overthrow the government. Shortly, I received a call from Fitzwater asking for time on CNN. Of course I gave the go ahead—not because of some wish to please the White House, but because the appearance would be news. Big news. Subsequently, Bush appeared, made his appeal, and the support from many heads of government around the globe was soon made known.

Anecdotes such as this and empirical observations by colleagues at CNN and elsewhere in the news industry, have convinced those of us in the global news business that we have begun to play a role in creating a world agenda for use by political leaders, governments, and heads of institutions of all kinds. CNN has become a common denominator, a reference point

* The Author is executive vice president of CNN, responsible for all the network's newsgathering resources, including the network's domestic and international news bureaus, the Special Assignment investigative unit, and the Special Reports documentary unit. He is also responsible for the news interview programs based in the Washington bureau.

Among his major accomplishments as executive vice president are the network's coverage of the 1991 Soviet coup, the war in the Persian Gulf, and the 1989 crisis in China. He was also responsible for the network's dramatic coverage of the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger and subsequent hearings, and gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Iran-Contra hearings.

of shared experiences and observations as they talk, fax, memo, and communicate with one another.

More important than being some form of international intercom, I think, is the role CNN and other supranational television news services play in reducing the dark places on earth. It is increasingly difficult for a tyrant to operate free from public scrutiny and the opprobrium of his fellow man.

From the old Russia to the new Haiti, and from the seeping of capitalism in China, the ever present and growing influence of the ubiquitous uplink, the INMARSAT telephone, the portable television equipment, the tiny high-8 amateur camera, the omnipresent radio, and the fax machine have now combined as a kind of political technology to deny dictators their need for secrecy. Only a few nations on earth remain truly isolated, for example, North Korea, some parts of China, western Siberia and a few others.

It is my belief that historians may well agree that one of the most important contributions of our time was to make available to the world a flow of information, news, entertainment, and advertising that forced other societies to attempt to match the freedom of the West and of the United States in particular.

During the decades since World War II, the export-import ledger was often weighted against the United States because of our relentless appetite for foreign goods, notably autos and home entertainment equipment. Ironically, the one export area in which the United States has surpassed all others in terms of demand, quality, and quantity is news and entertainment. These are the same news programs, television programs, and movies that many worried would destroy the national cultures of other consumer nations, a practice labeled "cultural imperialism." We quickly learned, if any doubts existed, that this was foolish nonsense. For example, it seemed highly unlikely that any series of situation comedies from Hollywood would destroy the French character. Nor could the news from the United States lessen a Brit's appetite for his or her own nine o'clock news bulletins. How could they? For example, we in the United States paid precious little attention to the beloved minutia of British politics, while the BBC or ITN dwelled with loving care over the latest scandal.

It is true that many local stories have national and international implications; that a ripple here can cause a wave over there. Yet, none of the national services will ever replicate the local flavor of a good television newscast or an aggressive local newspaper.

The coming explosion of technology in my industry will only lead to more and not fewer CNNs. The question is not whether we should permit such an invasion, but how responsibly will this news service be managed,

not to mention all the many niche services to come? Satellites and the compression of signals and digitalization of the picture will not be dis-invented. Presently there are an estimated 300 networks providing news, sports, entertainment, and informational programming to the globe. But for now, only CNN has the satellite configuration that permits an instant transmission of a single signal around the globe (save for a few spots not covered by our satellite footprint). This temporary hold will be eclipsed in time as other news organizations develop the will and resources to compete on a global scale.

One of the most significant changes from English-only programming will be the creation of national language all-news services or regional networks that pay no attention to national borders. NTV/Germany is a good example, serving as it does the German-speaking audience in Europe, particularly the home country, Switzerland, Austria, and some in Poland.

However, there can be little doubt that these services will reach—for the most part—only the elite of the country because of either the language skills necessary (English in most cases) and access to equipment, the home computer, or the specially wired television set. Of course, in time, the hardware will become more universally available. That will not be for the next decade, according to most who are predicting this kind of thing.

But I return to the great change: The ocean of words sloshing back and forth across the world, spewing out flotsam and facts, news and opinion, entertainment and information. What seems enormously difficult, logistically impossible, and educationally daunting today will be as matter of fact as turning on a light switch.

One is reminded of the great trauma that swept the old-line network newsrooms in the late 1950s and early 1960s when serious planning began on expanding their network evening news programs from fifteen minutes to thirty minutes. "How will we fill it?" was a commonly asked question. "What will we do on slow news days?" was the worry. Well, today, the following paragraph from a recent story in the *Chicago Tribune* fairly sums up the present and gives us a peek at the future:

This is the way the world works today—in a Swiss airliner somewhere over France, a German businessman picks up the phone and buys American dollars with Japanese yen on the London financial market while watching CNN from Atlanta.¹

1. R.C. Longworth, *Vanishing Borders: Trade in the 1990s*, CHI. TRIB., Apr. 23, 1989, at 1.

