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## Review of *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization*. David Singh Grewal. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

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The debate over globalization is often portrayed in both the mainstream media and some segments of academia as one that features two extremes. On one side are the “neoliberals” with a positive yet almost deterministic view of globalization. For them, the growth of an interconnected web of business, nonprofit, and governmental relations will ultimately improve living standards all over the world and the reach of this web has become all but inevitable. On the other side are those who see a nefarious side to globalization. They fear the extinction of cultural differences and ways of life for people powerless to resist the domination of forces such as the World Trade Organization, international banks, and the multinational corporations. What is often lacking in the debate is a sober and dispassionate analysis of globalization itself, an analysis that parses the influences of its more coercive aspects as well as those aspects that are the result of free and rational choices of citizens across the globe. It is this analysis that David Singh Grewal’s *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization* seeks to provide.

Instead of viewing globalization as a break from history, Grewal suggests that globalization in its present form has been unfolding for centuries. He quite correctly notes that Chateaubriand was writing about the same phenomena in 1841 that contemporary commentators write about today when he suggested that fiscal and commercial barriers would evaporate to a great extent as technology removes physical barriers between nations. Thus, Grewal suggests that it is the study of networks (relations between people across distances) and standards (how people in those networks interact) that offer the clearest picture of what we call globalization. He posits the concept of “network power.” While technical communicators in general concern themselves with the creation and maintenance of networks and issues such as centrality and optimization, Grewal demonstrates quite persuasively that such issues play out in both much larger and more diffuse settings. According to Grewal, the standards through which a network operates

are said to have value when all the members of the network adopt them as they offer a form of coordination that exhibits economies of scale. Next, as people enter a network and adopt these standards, the effect of this coordination is to eliminate many competing standards. When a user joins a particular network, the user increases the value of that network and decreases the value of his or her previous network affiliation. Defection to a new network becomes a standard for users to copy due to both social or economic momentum and rational and free choice. While this seems obvious in terms of competing networks such as “Pcs and Macs,” Grewal shows how the concept works in international settings. An example is provided by the adoption of English internationally, which, as it is an example he refers to throughout the book, bears repeating here.

Any language provides a mediating standard that governs communication within that linguistic network. The growth of English as a “global language” reflects the adoption of a standard. English was freely chosen as the language of air traffic control as far back as the 1950s and was adopted as official language of the European Monetary Union, although it is the “official” language in only two of the member nations. It is the language of choice on the internet as some 80% of online communication is conducted in English. While some understand these trends as the result of decisions forced upon linguistic communities by outside forces (which Grewal calls “sovereignty”), such a view misses the deliberate and rational choices non-native speakers of English have made. Clearly, the adoption of English as a global second language reflects America’s post-World War II rise as a commercial power, it is not simply due to this fact alone.

While some users learn English out of a felt sense of necessity, many freely choose to learn it as a way to communicate with non-native English speakers across the globe. Even though there are certainly external pressures to adopt English, speakers of other languages choose English as they believe that a bilingualism that includes English offers greater opportunities for advancement than one that includes any number of other languages. Of course, this widespread adoption of English guarantees the extinction of other languages. Paradoxically, however, sovereignty or governmental power can keep extinction at bay. The revival of Gaelic or Basque was not the result of reinvigorated interest in these languages. They came about through the actions of political elites. Thus, while network standards may encourage the choice of English, non-native speakers exercise a degree of agency in actually choosing English over other alternatives.

Yet, Grewal is perceptive in recognizing the tensions created through adopting the standards of attractive global networks while wanting to maintain a sense of national identity. A “politics of difference” often emerges even as people freely choose membership in a network. The Quebecois, for example, simultaneously resist and embrace participation in an Anglophone Canada. Here, Grewal discusses the notion of positive and negative rights and how each can be used, albeit imperfectly, to allow for the existence of alternative networks and standards. Yet, not all networks are compatible or modifiable and, because of direct governmental action and free choice and sociability, some networks will become less valuable than others as membership in such other networks will offer fewer attractive benefits. It is here that Grewal more-or-less abandons his previous discussion of agency for a sort of global determinism and this is a weakness

in his argument. While he quite correctly suggests that globalization as we understand it is the result of both voluntarism (“coalitions of the willing”) and action by government and large private organizations (the WTO, for example), his prescription for the creation of equitable global networks often fails to rise above platitude. While he seems to suggest that there are “alternative globalizations,” he does little to flesh these visions out, falling back on the notion that globalization is “inevitable.” Additionally, what he seems to posit as the failure of the WTO in producing new free trade agreements might actually reflect a more nuanced understanding of how global agreements should be handled. After a cogent and at times brilliant analysis of globalization through the lens of network power, the final third of the book provides a bit of a letdown.

These problems with Grewal’s prescriptions on how businesses, NGOs, and governments can move forward, however, do not detract from the fact that *Network Power* provides a useful alternative to the false binaries we often engage in when we discuss international matters. Network theory, in and of itself, makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of technical communication and, similarly, globalization theories provide useful insights, although, unfortunately, many novice technical writers often perceive international communication as a mere subset of the discipline. In combining the two approaches, Grewal provides a valuable contribution to our “big picture” view of technical communication.

The book, thus, is most useful for academics who research and teach professional writing as well as those technical communicators working in international commerce who, as Appadurai (1996) suggests, must by necessity concern themselves with the cultural effects of globalization. Grewal makes his discussions of language, economics, and technology accessible to an interdisciplinary audience and should thus be recommended reading for anyone concerned with the effects of globalization as well as how to navigate through global networks. Globalization is not simply the accretion of rational individual choices nor is it the outcome of forces beyond our control. It is both, as well as something different created by the interaction of the two. Grewal’s book provides a different way to consider globalization.

#### Reference

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.