



Charlie Chaplin's movie "The Great Dictator" seemed novel and fantastic in 1940, but is more trivial and non-symbolic today, as we all recognise the fragility of the earth and look at it as a globe. Photo: hmn.wiki/nl.

* This keynote speech was given by Professor Emeritus in Media Studies, Hans Fredrik Dahl, at Norsk Mediehistorisk Forening's seminar on Nordic foreign journalism, in cooperation with Oslo Metropolitan University and Volda University College, on 16 March, 2021.

Keynote

‘Nordic foreign journalism in the long 20th century’ – an introduction*



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Foreign news, as we all know, is a popular genre of journalism, which proliferated in the 20th century under certain conditions that make its context rather special. This context is above all a ‘world outlook’ or ‘global consciousness’ determined by circumstances, including two world wars and changing world governments, along with global issues like the pollution crisis and global warming – that is to say, by happenings and features typical of the 20th century. How this context has influenced journalism will be the theme of this keynote. As a start, let me just say that I take the ‘the long 20th century’ of my title to mean the 20th century up to our own age – that is to say, the period of interest here does not stop at the year 1999 but includes the last two decades as well.

Now, the need to look around and have a grasp of the outside world may of course be understood as a general ‘human condition’ – whether we be tinkers, tailors, soldiers or spies – as we are all keen to know what is going on beyond our immediate frame of reference. ‘Foreign news’ is relevant, not only to citizens of 17th century France or to 18th century Americans, but to everybody. Such an understanding of our trade is rather general, but important all the same. All of us participating in this seminar are working with rather

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small and limited cases of foreign news exchange – pawns in a much greater game, one could say – but we all bear in mind the more general view and perceive our studies as a response to a popular need to be able to see what’s going on – so as to be in command of one’s own surroundings.

The last century contains some special features in this respect - including perspectives not seen before, such as the need to consider *the world* as an entity and *mankind* as an actor. These are new perspectives. *How new*, exactly, may be up for discussion.

You may all recall the famous Charlie Chaplin scene when the dictator is dancing with a globe and dreaming of world power – and how it all explodes in a highly symbolic way: The dance was novel and fantastic in 1940, but it is more trivial and non-symbolic today as we all recognise the fragility of the earth and look at it as a globe.

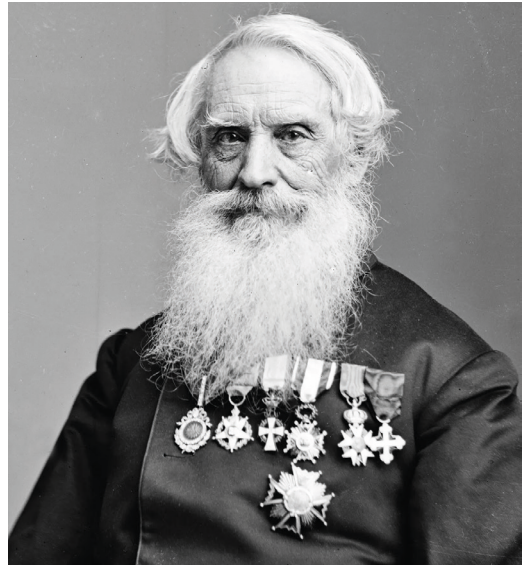
This is not to say that the public or the media were not ‘international’ before that – in the 19th or 18th centuries, for example. On the contrary, early newspapers were international to an astonishing degree. Even Nordic media – newspapers, sheets, boards, songs – were interested in parts of the outside world – elections, wars, accidents in other countries. Napoleon was nothing if not an astonishing ‘international’ agent, even a kind of world emperor, well known to everyone. The world, however, was scarcely seen as a globe – the notion of ‘the world’ being more limited (and not yet totally explored).

Now the question arises: is the modern global view a result of communications, of technical means to

communicate globally? The historian's answer would be, I think, to remind us that what made it possible to communicate foreign news to a popular audience by reporting from abroad to the big media outlets at home was electricity. Thus, this ability dates to the early part of the 19th century.

The introduction of telegraphy around 1840 opened the means of communicating news at greater speed than before, with daily dispatches during the Crimean war around 1850. The coup d'état of Napoleon III in 1852 was internationally known in a moment. With the cable telegraphy of the 1860s, even the United States was included in the international net of daily news; telegrams from there of course covered the civil war between the North and the South from 1861-65. Formally, telegraphic communication shaped the content of news, which was presented with quick resumés heading the story in case of the breakdown of lines. This is of course well known. What is more, in the course of a few years the telegraph entered the rivalry between newspapers themselves in the creation of competing news bureaus offering their services in a mix of state and private markets – the telegraphic lines being mostly government owned, while newspapers were mostly privately owned – and with foreign news offered to newspapers small and great alike. The system of international news bureaus and press services developed rapidly with Berlin, Paris and London as its centres, and with Copenhagen as the principal town in Scandinavia. Cable telegrams were exchanged, foreign news was distributed, and the press prospered in a typically 19th-century way with electric printing, rotating presses, cheap copies, mass readerships – all beyond our immediate frame of reference of this we know from reading history of the 19th century press.

Nevertheless, the concept of 'international news' gradually changed from scattered stories to regular chains of events – be it the German-Danish conflict over the southern parts of Jutland in the 1860s, or the



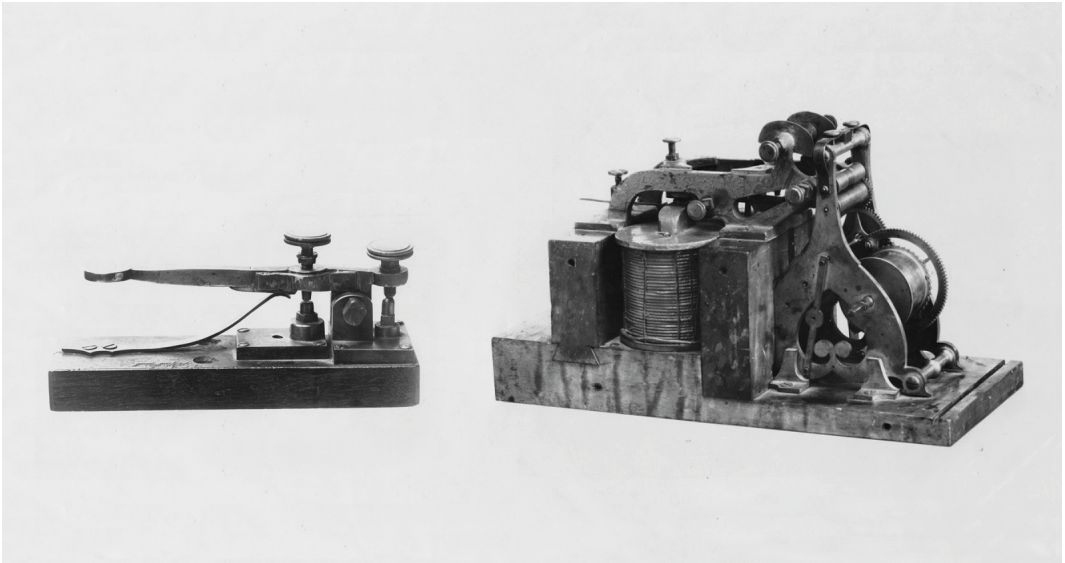
Samuel Morse (1791-1872), the inventor of the Electric Telegraph, photographed in 1860. Photo: Britannica.com.

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French-German rivalry and war of 1870, the underlying tensions of the revolutionary Paris Commune in 1871, the international economic crises of 1873, or the "Boxer" insurgency in China in 1899-1901, the never-ending Dreyfuss affair in France in the 1890s or the so-called Boer War in South Africa. Big events covered by daily dispatches from the major news agencies were in fact electrical communications, bolstered by the use of telephones from around 1900. Scattered news became 'true' stories, even in remote papers here in the North.

All this points towards electricity as the factor that made the world global, which would mean that the salient years in this respect belong to the 19th century and not the 20th. However, let us now look at what happened in the new century, and see if it was not the events themselves that stirred the imagination to develop new concepts.

The great war of 1914 and the subsequent Second World War in 1939 were 'world wars' in the sense that



Samuel Morse developed the Electric Telegraph in the years from 1832–35. At left in the image we see the "Morse-Vail-Key" (transmitter). At right we see the "Morse-Register" (Receiver). Photo: The New York Public Library/ National Museum of American History.

although the conflicts originated in Europe, they both extended to other continents, first by involving the US, and then other parts of the world – with the local European conflicts drawing soldiers even from Africa and Asia to the trenches of Flanders or the mountains of Sicily. It was as if our grandfathers' colonial scrambles in the 19th century now drew the world into the quarrels of the European great powers.

The notion of 'world war' did not, however, originate in 1914; the term was coined and certainly used to describe the clash between Russia and Japan in 1904-05, which was horrifying in its involvement of two continents. But in the 20th century, wars tended to encompass the whole globe.

Many of the papers here today are devoted to themes of the Cold War – its reasons, signs and consequences. The question for any one of us would be whether it's feasible to rethink about the term 'world war' in this respect. Was the Cold War a world war in the same respect as the First or Second wars were? In certain respects, yes, undoubtedly. There is an obvious continuity in what happened in the Second World War and in the Cold War in terms of the relations between the Great Powers; I do not

need to remind you of that. But the world wars of the period 1914-45 were brutally bloody, whereas the period 1950-90 was kept 'cold' and relatively free of clashes – even if the great powers pointed lethal rockets at each other – indeed, some assume that the nuclear missiles of the 1960s and 70s were several thousand times stronger than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. So, there are differences, certainly. Upon a closer look, the allied partnership of Russia (or the Soviet Union) with the Western powers in the earlier of these wars remains in stark contrast to the bitter antagonism between East and West in the ensuing cold war. If we leave aside the hostility between economic systems, we may perceive the Cold War as a Soviet attempt to contain a strong Germany through a ring of defensive states – and a Western attempt to prevent an upheaval of bolshevism within their territory. But then of course, we'll have to consider morally for how long the need to avoid a new Hitler lasted and how deep the desire to do so really was.

Apart from its role in allowing us to watch world wars hot and cold, the urge for foreign news and international journalism in the 20th century may



The League of Nations was founded in 1920, in the aftermath of World War 1. This image shows a plenary session of the International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation, attended by well-known figures in culture and science, among them Albert Einstein. Photo: UN Library&Archives Geneva.

be explained also by looking in another and opposite direction – at the 20th century peace-keeping mechanisms that sprang up after 1918. These were truly global also. True, there already were signs of growing international institutions from the 1890s, and they received news coverage as well. But the urge of internationality was much stronger in the following century. The League of Nations in Geneva with its Press Centre had indeed been promoting international news coverage since 1919; later, of course, came the United Nations in New York with its various news-spreading institutions after 1945, first and foremost UNESCO, established in 1946. But we may also count the various bureaus, think tanks, networks and associations working in the peace-keeping area and that were devoted to reducing the terrible possibility that the cold war would become hot. I need not say that quite a number of these institutions were not actively promoting peace so much as they were profiting from

its absence, but all the same they were global and world-encompassing to a degree that was unheard of before. The threat of global war promoted international journalism for how long the need to avoid a new Hitler lasted and how deep the desire to do so really was– or at least stimulated it.

Let us consider just a tiny piece of this greater canvas by looking at the establishment of the League of Nations in Geneva and its comprehensive information service, which was geared to the development of a genuine international journalism contrary to the rather partisan press from the war years 1914-18. The League especially helped the media in small countries. Even remote papers in the North could be as informed as the big ones – like *The Times* or *Le Parisien* for example – by making international relations the theme of an enlightened discourse everywhere. The information service was located close to the League's secretariat and headed by the experienced French-

man Pierre Comert, formerly the war correspondent for *Le Temps* in Berlin, seconded by the American journalist Arthur Sweeser, former correspondent for the Associated Press in France and in Washington. Their staff of some 20 experienced news people helped organise the several hundred media professionals who attended the League's yearly autumn meetings and the monthly gathering of the Council (today's Security Council), besides administering the several meetings of the labour bureau ILO, the arms control organs, the trade commission, the economic committee and the four other regular institutions besides the plethora of ad hoc conferences held outside Geneva – at Rappallo, San Remo, Stresa, Locarno etc. Each meeting was open to the press and was the subject of communiqués, minutes and references, supporting the flow of international communications from these international fora. Each member country normally kept a delegation of their own in Geneva, seconded to the International Press Union in their biannual conference. Together this formed a vast international news machinery covering such diverse topics as slavery, arms control, the care of minorities and refugees, the struggle for drug prevention and health promotion, and colonial and economic issues. Such international meetings however tended to be parades of governments officials, something about which the press complained. What should have been debates tended to be parades, and what were supposed to be themes of journalism tended to be governmental agendas with the intent to plant fake news to discredit others. Indeed, the League's Sixth Commission handling culture and journalism more than once complained of the member states' spreading of false news and misleading information to promote their own positions instead of providing material for international journalism. How could newspapers promote peace and international understanding when fed with fake news and false information by governments? The committee hoped to address the

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problem with a new meeting of bureaus and press associations in Copenhagen in 1933 to combat fake news, and a further conference in Madrid with the same purpose. But these hopes were dashed in the face of a new threat – that of rising fascism in the 1930s – as Rolf Werenskjold and I describe in our forthcoming book.¹

In fact, there was an international aspect to this new phenomenon spreading from Italy, Germany, Spain, Japan and Austria during the 1930s. Reporting on the novel movement of fascism was a major challenge for journalists of the time. Of course, there are a lot of things to say about fascism and its impact on journalism, with its propaganda, deceits, lying, alternative facts and the rest – we all recognise this from recent developments in the US. In this connection, we'll single out one item to pinpoint an essential aspect of fascism – the movement's international character. This indeed was a novelty. Well, socialists had strived to make their movements international since the 19th century, but nobody believed that this really mattered in the interwar years. Instead, this new international force, consisting of countries that hadn't cooperated in the 1920s but by the 1930s were linked by the concept of 'international fascism', interpreted as a universal revolt of the middle classes (or whatever the new movement meant) aspiring to some sort of a global tendency. International relations textbooks identify this as a new tendency of the 1930s; old foes became friends by leaning into a novel, general and ideological tendency – fascism, a type of regime-ideology that united them in their opposition to liberal regimes in Europe, thus splitting the international community by preparing for war. I know of no better documentation of this than the letter written by a journalist in Spain during the civil war, explaining to her mother in Oslo why the articles she wrote for a Norwegian paper had to be overly optimistic so as to avoid mentioning the possibility of General Franco's victory in the war

– “if fascism wins, mother, then there will be a new war in Europe started by these people, which must be avoided at any cost ...”

Then came the war. It is surprising that not one single paper presented at this conference seems related to World War II, with its gigantic clash of nations, economics and weapons – not to mention the way that this war stimulated foreign news coverage by media everywhere. In the Nordic countries there is quite often a direct link between wartime information or propaganda and regular journalism after 1945 - as most media outlets hired people with a background in wartime engagement as correspondents in London, Washington or Paris.

Now for the Cold War, in one way or another the subject of most of the presentations today. What would a historian say about this period – the forty years from 1950 to 1990?

Let us first ask: Are there any other periods in media history similar to this one? Situations involving years-long hostility, serious armaments and permanent tensions - and a rapidly growing practice

of espionage? I doubt it very much. Indeed, I consider the Cold War to be a very special period in world history for several reasons – even though tensions between great powers is in a way trivial, as is the struggle for dominance, peace efforts combined with rearmaments, and so on. The phenomenon of international crises is but normal in this world. But here we have 40 years with more or less the same players! The same structure of antagonism, the same pattern! *That* is unusual in a world perspective, to say the least. Even if tensions between Paris and London, between Moscow and Berlin and so on are normal in European history, occurring at shifting intervals and with lots of surprising twists and turns, with the Korean War we are faced with a completely new situation. Here the situation is stable in a long lasting, enduring way. Let’s see what this means in the contexts of ‘foreign news’ and ‘foreign journalism’.

First of all – an element of stability in relations –

in careers, languages, skills required to handle the situation. In former years, ‘internationalism’ was equivalent to sudden shifts and changes – in diplomacy, economics, whatever. In contrast, the antagonism between Moscow and Washington is a more or less permanent fixture from 1945/50 until the early 1990s. Of course, there was permanence in relations earlier on – but the Cold War with its pattern of East-West divisions seems unheard of in this respect – continuing as it did for years, decades. One must think of all the institutions that can be built within a span of forty to fifty years. Among them the system of foreign news correspondents.

Before going further into the correspondent system, it must be said that not everything was stable. New issues emerged in this new, more global world – the poverty of the third world, the need for food

supplies, the restlessness of younger generations – now merging as general trends spread by global solidarity and international relations. The Vietnam War, the student protests, women’s lib, the greening of older habits – all were

new subjects of news reporting – but presenting themselves *as global trends* within the framework of the Cold War – of permanence. This stability in international relations is what makes the period special if not unique.

By 1945, leading newspapers of the North had of course had foreign correspondents sending home daily reports from Paris, London and Berlin for several decades already.

What happened to journalism in our century was a general shift from letter-writing to correspondence in the field of reporting from the outside world – the letter-writer being a travelling person paid for his occasional reporting, whereas the correspondent was a regular contributor with a permanent address who relied on telegraphic/telephonic communication. Thus, “letters from abroad” written by mostly accidental travellers, were gradually overshadowed around the year 1900 by news telegrams sent by cor-

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respondents. The need for daily news from the world seemed to promote this new profession of foreign news correspondents.

Swedish papers, in particular, sent their best journalists out. Even smaller countries like Finland and Norway had newspaper correspondents abroad. What happened after the Second World War was that loosely employed stringers were replaced by staff members and journalists being sent abroad. Media outlets built a veritable system of regular foreign correspondents. Around 1975-80, the system seemed to reach its peak. There were radio, television and newspaper correspondents in some ten to twelve capitals of the world, apart from journalists sent out on special occasions and at various destinations. Travelling journalists like Sweden's Barbro Alving and Sven Öste were a constant presence, well known for their contributions throughout the Nordic countries. Research on the topic is scant, however, with little international comparison of these news lines, and no reliable Nordic studies. Let me briefly summarise a survey of how the Norwegian system developed, compiled by my colleague Rolf Werenskjold, to map a single country's situation as a sign of the more general pattern² – after all, every country's foreign news tended to keep an eye on what was going on in neighbouring countries as well. According to this survey, the pattern follows five stages: The initial development of a network of foreign news correspondents after the war, headed by a rather small number of correspondents and home staff from newspapers and from the news bureau NTB; the period 1965-75 which was marked by expansion, for example letting broadcasting in; the peak in 1975-95 when all major media outlets had regular correspondents in at least 6 or 7 different capitals; and finally the gradual downscaling both of editorial staff at home and of correspondents abroad after 1995.

The development and maintenance of this system often led to inter-Nordic cooperation, linking Norway's NTB with its Swedish counterpart TT, the Finnish NB and the Danish Ritzaus Bureau with the establishment of a joint foreign news correspondent post, first in Brussels and then in other places, while regional papers shared correspondents with

various Swedish media outlets. Such sharing was normal, as was the gradual extension of the system to other parts of the world – the Middle East, South America and Africa – until downscaling became the norm after 1995. One might wonder why the system dwindled, and Werenskjold gives four reasons: the end of the Cold War and the resulting need for the media to re-orientate editorially in a new world; the new situation in foreign news coverage heralded by CNN and other satellite channels; a domestic economic slump leading to a general downscaling of the media; and lastly, the new internet technology making keyboards at home more useful – and much cheaper – than old-fashioned correspondents abroad. Which of those four reasons has been the most fatal to the system of correspondents might be up for debate. If you are in favour of the Cold War coming to an end you may ask why this happened. Why did this war-like situation actually end?

Notes

- 1 Hans Fredrik Dahl and Rolf Werenskjold (forthcoming), *Norsk utenriksjournalistikks historie i det 20. århundre*
- 2 See Rolf Werenskjold (2011), *Det norske utenriksjournalistiske systemet. That's the Way it is? Protestene og mediene i 1968*. Phd, University of Oslo, p. 227-255; and Jan Fredrik Hovden and Rolf Werenskjold (2018), *Reporting the Cold War: The Norwegian Foreign-News Journalists and Foreign-News Correspondents, 1945-95. Media and the Cold War in the 1980s: Between Star Wars and Glasnost*, Henrik G. Bastiansen, Martin Klimke and Rolf Werenskjold, New York/Oxford, Berghahn Books, p. 189-221.