Towards a global conversation

By Thomas Hylland Eriksen[1]

The Internet came into the world in earnest a little more than twenty years ago, and it came with a vengeance, criss-crossing the planet with invisible ties of connectedness and seemingly heralding a new era in global communication. From one day to the next, you could correspond with colleagues and friends on the other side of the planet; you could read newspapers from Australia and Botswana; you could join special interest groups and build professional networks. It was an exhilarating time for many of us, one which appeared to hold out a promise of truly global communication for the first time in human history.

But, as we academics are prone to say, things were more complicated than that. The world did not become flat just like that; it remained round and bumpy. Most Internet use remained local, restricted by language skills and concerns with the domestic sphere. Large parts of the world population, most glaringly in Africa, remained offline. The technology was available, but not to all, and not in equal measure. Besides, as has become increasingly evident over the years global communication can often exacerbate tension and conflict. The global village is not a teashop. At least not all the time.

Oscar Hemer and I had shared an interest in globalisation and technology since the early 1990s, when we co-convened a study circle in the Nordic Summer University on the globalisation of culture. We both wrote about the potentials and pitfalls of increased global connectedness, and even co-edited a small book on ambivalence and fundamentalism - *Ambivalens og fundamentalisme*, Spartacus 1999- with contributions from people who had taken part in the NSU group. It was around this time that Oscar started the ComDev programme, based on a cosmopolitan vision of a transnational conversation that could make a difference, and which was almost overnight made far easier than before thanks to the new technologies. Oscar managed to obtain some external funding from SIDA and began to recruit students, and the staff began to grow. Notably, he got the technological whiz kid Micke Rundberg on board, who soon set about developing user-friendly platforms for communication in real time, eventually enabling students located in remote places to communicate almost seamlessly with those who were in Malmö. Student recruitment was not only good, but increasingly transnational and intercontinental, and it has remained so till this day. ComDev was path-breaking when it began, and it remains unusual, innovative and important today, bringing together people from around the world with shared interests, engaging world-class lecturers and guest speakers – Orhan Pamuk visited in the early days, Achille Mbembe more recently – and using state-of-the-art technology to hold the whole project together. Oscar and his collaborators have also managed to organise ComDev seminars in enticing and intellectually challenging abroad, from Sarajevo to Durban.

Glocal Times has traced and documented the development of the ComDev conversation in the last ten years, and its vitality bears testimony to the ongoing – indeed growing – significance of the programme. It has been a privilege to be part of the external ComDev lecturer team since the beginning, watching it grow and develop over the years, and it is no less exciting to follow the interdisciplinary dialogue about power, communication, technology, media and

social change in the journal, has – appropriately – been online and open-access since the beginning.

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Globalisation – or glocalisation – became a catchword in the social sciences and humanities in the 1990s, the concept became established in academic study programmes by the 2000s, and the focus in globalisation studies continues to evolve and change, partly because of theoretical innovations, but chiefly because of abrupt and dramatic changes in the outside world. Perhaps these developments signify continuity as much as change; they certainly have contributed to shifting the academic gaze towards the world of global communication.

The first dramatic world event after ComDev was established was the 9/11 terrorist attack on the USA in 2001. It led to the infamous 'war on terror', stimulated mutual suspicion and indeed hatred between Muslims and Westerners, and set back and slowed down the quest for a reasonably democratic, open global dialogue. Feeding straight into Oscar's and my notion that globalisation leads to a polarisation between 'fundamentalism' and 'ambivalence' (Hylland Eriksen & Hemer, 1999), the terrorist attack gave us food for thought on the tension between divisive identity politics and cosmopolitan respect, raising a discussion that remains relevant to date.

A few years later, the notion of 'Web 2.0' or 'the social media' had begun to catch on. Facebook had been launched, as had a variety of other online platforms for communication. YouTube was soon becoming a main source of information for people, presumably mostly young, who were not in the habit of watching the nine o'clock news or reading books. This change was reflected in ComDev's approach through a broadening of the range of what should be counted as media, and some enlightening and useful discussions about their mutual differences.

With the terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, and the Danish cartoon affair also in 2005, it might have been tempting to refocus ComDev towards identity politics, and militant Muslim identity politics in particular. This did not happen, since these European events, spectacular as they might be, are only details on a global canvas where some of the most significant developments happened elsewhere. Accordingly, we zoomed in on the fast spread of the Internet in Africa and other parts of the global south, the phenomenal rise of China as a global power, questions pertaining to intellectual property rights, censorship and the popular revolts in North Africa and the Middle East 'the Arab Spring'. In my own lectures, I started to use Steven Vertovec's concept 'superdiversity', referring to a new social situation, especially in cities, where the ethnic and cultural mix is far more complex than it was only a couple of decades ago. The term superdiversity, suggesting a *diversification of diversity*, seemed to work well in the overall context of global communication: we are all closer to each other than ever before, and this situation not only holds out a promise of better mutual understanding and a more equitable world, but also leads to intensified frictions and the proliferation of mutual misunderstandings.

A couple of years ago, I revised and updated my *Globalization: The Key Concepts*, originally completed in 2006. The changes from the first to the second edition can be said to reflect the changes between ComDev in its first and its second decade. (Incidentally, the book was

initially inspired not least by my long-standing relationship with Oscar Hemer and ComDev.) Some of the emerging topics were the rise of a global precariat, where job security and strong unions seem to belong to the past; intensified migratory pressures on the boundaries of the rich world; the spread of Internet among the poor; the ubiquity of Chinese firms and products across the world; the 'appification' of life in the global middle classes, where the smartphone has become a natural extension of the body; the intensification of Muslim identity politics *and* secular reactions to it, especially in the Middle East; and, last but not least, a growing sense of vulnerability owing to manmade climate change, which places lofty visions of development and growth on hold in a rather decisive way. Currently, I use the term *overheating* as a general metaphor for describing the present world of accelerated change (see www.uio.no/overheating).

These are some of the issues at the forefront of the global conversation about human futures. They are being addressed at ComDev and in *Glocal Times*, not primarily with consensus as an ultimate aim, but as a way of bringing this shared planet of ours into being as an imagined community – divided, fragile, contested, but no less real.

Acknowledgment

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