Conversation on Global Communication: Concepts, Contexts and Focus Issues

PREFACE

Professor Price is the Director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Global Communication Studies (CGCS) at the Annenberg School for Communication. He works with a wide transnational network of regulators, scholars, and practitioners in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia as well as in the United States. In China, he has worked most closely with the Communication University of China, Tsinghua University, Peking University, Renmin University of China and Chinese Academy of Social Science. He jointly organized international academic conferences, webinars and summer schools and partnered with National Center for Radio & TV Studies on Global Olympiad, Chinese Media in Beijing from which he published an edited volume in English. CGCS hosted the 2009 Chinese Internet Conference. Professor Price also is Chair of the Center for Media and Communication Studies of the Central European University in Budapest and founder of the Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy at Oxford University. CGCS’s research and policy work addresses issues of media regulation, media and democracy, measuring and evaluation of media development programs, public services broadcasting, and the media’s role in conflict and post-conflict environment.

It is also worth noting that here is the third interview with Monroe Price published in the past half-year. The first is about global political communication and it appeared in the summer 2010 issue of the IE University alumni magazine (Dean Samuel Martin-Barbero of the IE school of communication, interviewer). It may be said to provide a European perspective (http://global.asc.upenn.edu/fileLibrary/PDFs/IE_Summer_2010.pdf); the second, conducted by Professor Jack Linchuan Qiu, features questions from the perspective of the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong. It appears in the September 2010 issue of the Chinese Journal of Communication (http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all?content=10.1080/17544750.2010.499625); this third conversation emerges from conversations with a scholar from Chinese mainland who was a Visiting Research Scholar at CGCS. Making a general observation on these three interviews may introduce some special meaning or reflect more multiple perspectives and comprehensive contents. I also hope to display both China and American scholar’s view on Communication, China and the world, to find the identity and difference on the relevant concepts and issues in different contexts.
INTerviewer

After being a lawyer and law professor for over twenty years, you turned to the field of communication research and then set up the Center for Global Communication Studies (CGCS). Under what kind of circumstances, what make you do such a big shift? I am curious about what was going on? Now looking back, how do you view the choice you made? Have you fulfilled your mission or motivation? What do you think is the most important academic achievement with your CGCS team? How about the implication in real practice?

I’m glad of the choice I made. Annenberg has allowed me to expand on thoughts I’ve had for decades in an environment where those thoughts are more central. Annenberg has enabled me to help certain institutions to flourish, particularly the Center in Budapest at CEU and the Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy in Oxford. I also liked, at that stage in life, to have an enormous new challenge as opposed to sliding into retirement. CGCS has many achievements, represented by the work of its graduate students and its extended family. What I am hoping over the next few years is for additional scholarly breakthroughs, as for example, in our proposed studies of media ecologies.

Global Communication is a common concern issue these years. How do you understand global communication as a concept? In China, a more commonly used concept is “International Communication”, what do you consider the difference between them?

Perhaps these are just words. But I believe more is at stake. When authors use the term “global,” they may be implying a declining role of the state and state sovereignty. As a term, “international” has within it notions of bilateral or multilateral decisions. “Global” could be seen as an aspiration, also as a fear, of the weakening of the state. In addition, global may imply something more pervasive, more geographically inclusive than international.

How would you evaluate the development of global communication research in recent years?

Global communication research is still at an early stage. We need more institutions where language facility is felicitous—where people can move from one system to another, become familiar with what is going on, in an intimate way, in many societies. It is very hard to build cultures that can do this.

How would you view the relationship between global communication research and global communication? Can the former help us improve our understanding of the latter? Or is global communication research a social intervention to global
There’s always a question about the uses of research—except research that is specifically tailored to serve economic opportunity. Definitely, there are efforts to encourage research that confirm or overturn assumptions about the relationship between forms of media and governance or forms of media and economic development. In that sense research can help us understand what interventions should or could take place to achieve particular objectives.

You mentioned the proposed studies of media ecology. Could you speak any more about this effort, about its theoretical foundations, about its research methodology and method, and about its expected impacts on reality?

For several years, Nicole Stremlau and I have hoped to develop a model for demonstrating a media or information ecology. Sometimes we call this a “diagnostic” of information flows. Our goal is to identify what the key drivers of influence and identity are within a society and to place the functioning of press, broadcasting and Internet in a larger frame that includes song and sermon, poetry and popular culture. This kind of task—too daunting—draws on many sources: Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Communities,” the pioneering research of Karl Deutsch, the work on comparing media systems of Hallin and Mancini, and the influence and propaganda-related studies of Lasswell and Lazarsfeld and de Sola Pool.. We will probably proceed—in some first steps—by looking at partial diagnostics: media mapping, examining a blogosphere that incorporates a society and its diaspora, a literature review where scholars—looking at a variety of topics such as the structure of religion—are simultaneously, though unknowingly, contributing to a diagnostic. The practical result is not yet clear: presumably it allows a number of players, including NGOs, political parties, others in the “market for loyalties” to understand that market better.

Professor Elihu Katz wrote the following for your book Media and Sovereignty: The Global Information Revolution and Its Challenge to State Power: “Globalization usually connotes porosity of national boundaries, the fragmentation of loyalties and the power of media moguls. Monroe Price is here to remind us of the ways in which the national-state continues to determine who says what to whom, both domestically and internationally.” Now eight years have passed, do you have any new ideas or anything to add regarding this?

No. It’s pointless to try to improve on Elihu Katz. He’s living proof of how ideas (his ideas) penetrate national boundaries and bespeak changing ideas of loyalties. He’s the master.
So another related big topic is about international broadcasters such as BBC, VOA, RFA (Radio Free Asia) etc. Taking BBC or VOA in Chinese as an example, how would you think about integrated relation between global communication and sovereignty? Is sovereignty global communication's enemy or friend?

Sovereignty in its most benign sense could be defined here as an aspiration towards the orderly and beneficial implementation of the global. Sovereignty does not automatically mean blocking or barriers. It does mean an insistence (often but not always frustrated) to assert an interest of the state. Among cooperative sovereigns—take the European Union for example—agreement, expansion of trade in goods and information is an exercise of sovereignty. Sovereignty should facilitate as well as refine global communication. But that does recognize well-meaning negotiation over the traffic in information and imagery. Major documents, like the European Convention on Human Rights, represent the exercise of sovereignty (the decision to join or adhere) in a way that reduces or delimits the state’s power to exclude information. Sovereignty works best where there is mutual respect among states.

While you were working on the book Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China (edited with Daniel Dayan), a case study of 2008 Olympics in Beijing, you and your team had chance to closely contact with China and investigated media, academics, and governmental organizations in Beijing. More than that, you have co-organized various types of symposiums and workshops with several universities in China. So, what’s your overall impression about international communication and global communication in China? Do you think there are some differences between China and The United States, as well as the East and the West in terms of communication ideas, communication ethics, communication values, and etc.? How do you evaluate these differences? Could you please make some suggestions about the communication research in the context of China?

It’s been a pleasure to work with universities in the international communication space. Each country has its own way of looking at the world and this public and overarching view permeates the culture of education and research. It would be interesting to find ways of understanding these differences. In terms of the Olympics book, for example, I found that (not surprisingly) much of the research in China was instrumental: how is China being perceived, is the Organizing Committee doing the effective thing, will the Olympics be a success. In the communication schools in the United States, people think of their research as more distanced, less instrumental, almost purposely and aesthetically critical. Perhaps this is somewhat a delusion in the United States, but it is a tradition in some fields.
Similarly, there are styles of research and writing that are different and maybe should and maybe should not be emulated. There does seem to be an “international standard” and journals that represent that standard. Certainly some upcoming China scholars—more I think—should seek to meet that standard. But it requires a specialized vocabulary and way of writing that is a bit mannered and its own theater. I somehow think it would not be wise for all institutions globally to make a particular kind of writing into the exclusive ritual for getting ahead. How scholars in China (and institutions) deal with this complicated dance among international standards, government needs, and personal capacities will be interesting to observe.

Civil Society, Mass Media, NGO and etc. are very popular words in China, but these concepts and their applications in China have very different backgrounds and contexts. You and your CGCS have worked in dozens of different countries all over the world, collaborating with their media research organizations, and even involving in their social movement. So what are your feelings and opinions on these issues? What do you think the role the media plays during the process of globalization and democratization?

We enjoy working with NGOS and civil society and examining how they are flourishing or not and what difference that makes in the strengthening of democratic institutions. I guess we are of the school that demand-driven shaping of political institutions is important and largely by strengthening civil society can that organically take place. In this, we are children of the post-Soviet developments and the myths that have emerged about the power of civil society in Poland and elsewhere. Civil society for me also means a society that is civil—informed, receptive, dialogic, creative.

Would you please also comment on the internet and civil society? Actually after studying new media events which happened frequently in recent years in China, some scholars think that the media mechanism in China and the Chinese community may affect the future of global communication because it looks like there is new mechanism behind new media event: civil news and public opinion. Do you have any idea about the similar research done in other developing countries? Are there any cases or new theories coming out of this research?

It’s important to be both a civil society enthusiast and a skeptic of the most expansive claims that are made for civil society as a change agent. There is no question that in the Internet, civil society has found a compatible medium. The Internet can help create new layers, new formations, new associations—all of which enliven civil society and make it more effective. At the same time, as was seen during the Olympics, civil society can be a beast that moves in many directions. Too much of the literature assumes a straight line—or one that is not so wavering—between the
Internet, civil society and the growth of democratic institutions. The “mosque debate” in the United States is a case where Internet and legacy media frenzy play off each other. I believe in research that examines the fundamental assumptions—the link in chains of logic—and sees whether those links stand up to observation.

Here, research on the uses and effects of social media seem to me highly significant. Much is being attributed to the cascading new phenomena and, again, many claims are not clearly substantiated. Much of the work that is being done at the Oxford Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy is about the process—particularly in complex and conflict-related societies. What are the circumstances in which the rising narrative of support for civil society makes sense? What’s the emerging role of the state, through entry, surveillance, censorship and other modes of affecting the relationship between civil society and the Internet? What is an emerging structure of NGO involvement? Will there be dominating NGOs, some of them international, that set the agenda?

*The power of NGOs around the world can never be overlooked. In China, NGOs usually exert their influence through the power of the government and the media, forming some media strategies and developing their own space. How do you evaluate the functions and objectives of international NGOs? And what’s the relationship between NGOs, media and government?*

The role of international NGOs in affecting public attitudes and foundations of governance has hardly been touched. I think there has to be a classification of NGOs, what I sometimes call “campaigning NGOs” as differentiated from “service NGOs.” Also interesting are how NGOs are structured and financed. Passion and direction may be donor-driven to some extent, so understanding these issues is increasingly important. And—to question my just-made distinction—when do “service NGOs” become embroiled in fixing or changing government action, including fighting for foundational changes that address underlying causes of the problems the NGO is attacking.

In this respect, the role of the government in the “receiving society” is increasingly interesting. Do NGOs have greater rights or a more privileged status? What regulator differentiation can be made between domestic and international NGOs? What standards would be relevant for the receiving society to impose?

*You were interviewed by an academic magazine from Europe, and one question was “which lessons, ideas or structures could U.S. researchers in this field borrow from their peers in other parts of the world, such as Europe and Asia?” Your answer focused on research methods, saying the needle will move more towards qualitative*
analyses partly if it involves efforts by U.S. researchers to understand political communications globally. “It may be more difficult to find and rely on data. ...” Would you talk specifically about your views on this issue? What theoretical or methodological breakthroughs do you think could have in global communication study at the era of globalization?

I have no easy answers to this question. The infrastructure for research is complicated and the infrastructure for transnational cooperation is much more so. I think more needs to be done to encourage visits like yours to Annenberg and ways have to be found for more U.S. graduate students in the field to spend time in universities in China. I’m a big enthusiast for the China Internet Research Conference because it tries to build an international community around the issues. This summer, I tried to initiate possibilities for joint research in health communications studies with Renmin. There was some progress, but not enough. It takes continuing commitment, resources, enthusiasm and a mission. I would like to see Annenberg work with a consortium of China universities to strengthen, for example, health communication studies and political communications studies. But just having the idea and desire is hardly enough.

When looking back on your career, you keep asking yourself--What is the role so many “experts” and advisors should play in maintaining or encouraging social change? Did you ever try to find the answer from the relationship between concept and reality?

Maybe I’ve tried, but unsuccessfully. Concepts are easier, cleaner, more pliable. Maybe that’s one of the attractions of communication studies—to see “reality” as the refraction of the complexities through media understandings. One difference between law and communication is that lawyers often represent reality as if they could feel and touch it while communication scholars recognize the significant role of intermediaries in portraying what constitutes the real.

One theory is that the United States is only rich in professional scholars, meaning that the history and the tradition of public intellectuals here is very weak. While it’s very different in Europe, many famous scholars in Europe can be considered as public intellectuals. But Dr. Antonio Lambino, who once worked as a news anchor in his native Philippines and had been a doctoral candidate in Annenberg referred to you as “an excellent example of a public intellectual--someone who uses their academic training to effect change.” many faculties and students in Annenberg also stressed that you have opened so many doors towards globalization. All of these, “Intellectual”, “public intellectual”, “professional scholar” and “academic” are also very hot topic in today’s China. What do you think of these terms such as
“Intellectual”, “public intellectual”, “professional scholar” and “academic”? How do you define these terms? As a scholar, how do you think about media and social movements?

Maybe this also comes from my training as a lawyer, particularly at the Yale Law School. Yale’s education was one that vaunted public service and some contribution to public debate. Of my 150 classmates, many ran for public office, became law professors, founded public interest law firms, wrote books on capital punishment. We were to think of ourselves as “officers of the court,” as having a duty to some set of ethical values and public purposes. Graduate study has some of this, but is more driven to some degree of detachment, observation, critical study. Some of this has to do with situating graduate study in relation to government and how public decisions are made. Annenberg has a strong tradition of thinking about many of these questions, both through individual faculty actions and the Annenberg Public Policy Center. It’s a bit of the DNA left by Walter Annenberg.

You are called “the most networked man in the world” by insiders. Your network extends from relevant local institutes, schools to universities, think tanks and NGOs around the world. How do you see the interaction between the promotions of networking, teaching and research? What’s the mission and aim of communication education? In the U.S, I have heard one popular argument is “the future of education is to find peaceful ways of conflict resolution.” Do you agree with this?

Those insiders are too inside my world! But I love finding useful relationships. It’s a way of creating value where it was not clear value existed before. It allows for new kinds of music to be played, newly turned thoughts to be thought. Networking in this sense is a way for individuals to see beyond their self-definition to a new set of associations. Networking is a way of providing for new insights. It’s just important not to turn this trick into a set of revolving doors, without accumulated impact.

I noticed that you have collected many posters from USSR and China, is it something just related your private hobby or something related your research of image communication?

I'm a somewhat obsessive gatherer of "works on paper:" lithographs, drawings and posters. Looking at what I've collected, I seem to be captivated by the use of images as a way of shaping public attitudes and building loyalties. Maybe the use of graphic images to do this—rather than slick and expensive television—is over, but I am somewhat wistful about that period. So it is a private hobby, but a hobby that is tied to things I write about and think about in communications studies. In a way, what
binds all this together is what might be called the regulation of imagery—whether it's paintings or posters or television or radio. It's nice to have tactile examples in my house, on my walls, in my office, that remind me and others of the importance of all this.