GROUNDING THE DISPLACED

Local Media Reception in a Transnational Context

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Abstract

Local media perform a linking function for displaced audiences in a global landscape. Consumption of home based press while being in a foreign context is mainly a ritualistic cultural practice in securing personal identity, familiar formulations of cultural spaces and communities of origin. Ethnographic research revealed that national newspapers allowed readers to (re)produce situated identity marks menaced by globalization. Then, audiences may be using local media to ground themselves in symbolic environments which external and internal

Grounding the displaced
boundaries are also reassured through time and space. It is in this local cultural setting where individual and collective identities acquire certain stability and self-confidence in their viability.

Grounding the Displaced

Local Media Consumption in a Transnational Context

There is a frequent scene in many libraries of the "developed" world. Foreign residents gather and read their home based media in the international newspaper section. These <u>dispersed</u> or <u>wandering</u> audiences (Grossberg, 1988; Radway, 1988) are represented in this article by the foreign students of a University in the U.S. Their discourses, displayed after or while reading their national presses, reveal the sense in consuming outdated media referring to a distant environment. A <u>communal function</u> of communication (Philipsen, 1992, pp. 139-140) was observed, showing interlocutors expressing cultural senses of shared identities and group memberships. Readers attempted a symbolic linking and identification with their cultural roots.

The ethnolinguistic perspective (Fitch, 1994; Carbaugh, 1994) was used to describe the ways that local mass communication linked disconnected people and moved them to construct a narrative, made up of communal dimensions of identity. But cultural positioning also implied sources of conflict and difference that distinguished among the members of the same cultural community or separated them from the host culture.

The most recurring effort of the audience was to establish a ritualistic link providing some basic processes for identity-building and cultural belongingness: Imaginary role playing, the celebration of one's cultural space as stable and solid, and the symbolic construction of internal and external boundaries in the service of a situated identity. These boundaries were established above and below the national level to define the <u>foreigners</u> and the <u>compatriots</u>.

In what follows, I argue that foreign students fit the archetype of modern audiences, because of their territorial displacement and consumption of a wide range of both local and global messages.[i] Secondly, I bring together the theoretical categories (which became meaningful when interpreting the ethnographic data) and present the analysis. Finally, the discussion aims to cast some light on the debate regarding the global media landscape and the instability of modern identity.

Global Audiences and Local Media Use

Cultural identities and settings have become focal points for socio-political debates in the late twentieth century driven by the so-called <u>identity politics</u>. Cultural belongingness threatens to replace genetic purity in Western societies as an old and exclusive form of ethnicity that denigrates Eastern and Southern cultures (Hall, 1993). Such a closed definition of citizenship meets contradictory trends of transnational integration and homogenization, i.e. the institutional construction of a pan-European identity (Drummond, Paterson & Willis, 1993). Given these tensions, each citizen faces a complexity of identities that are required to deal with multiple points of self-reference. Not surprisingly, individuals and communities alike search in the mass media for symbolic realms of confrontation or encounter.

Adapting the words of Anthony Giddens (1990, p. 64), the individual experiences the

intensification of social relations on a world-wide scale. Often these relations are funnelled by the media, which link far off localities in such a way that local identities are shaped by distant events. Thus, contemporary individuals lack confidence in their self-

identities and in the constancy of the surrounding environments of actions (Giddens, 1990, p. 92). The ever growing human diaspora uproots the cultural settlements (Williams, 1983, p. 184) where to live, work and establish a given identity. Thus, the constitution of local identities is a precarious project affected by the national and transnational tensions in which it takes place. While global communication tends to disrupt existing forms of local identity, it may also offer new forms of bonding and solidarity (Ang, 1990). Herein lies the main reason for observing foreign students: They must bring together the pieces of their personal identities and reassemble them in cultural spaces that may only be visible through the local media.

Media research done on foreign students has followed commercial and administrative approaches (Ellison & French, 1958; Adams, 1969; Peirce, 1970). Our focus is to explore reception when the spatial and temporal dimensions of the communication process have been altered in a drastic fashion. Most theories on media reception took for granted the immediacy between media content and its context of use. Therefore, certain messages could be related to almost immediate purposes and gratifications. Reception meant the intentional pursuit of information, entertainment or social relations (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). However, the three classic gratifications do not provide straightforward interpretations of local media reception while being in a foreign country. Faster information technologies (television, telephone or e-mail) are available. The contents of the elite press - the one most accessible in transnational contexts - and its presentation certainly do not offer an amusing leisure activity. And, finally, not even regular social interaction through the media seems feasible, because of the lack of shared knowledge and/or interests among foreigners and/or expatriates. Unfortunately, the much revised versions of media use typologies, even if based on the observation of multicultural audiences (Lull, 1995, p. 108), do not supply a clear guide to interpret diasporic audiences.

Media Searches for Identities

As a cultural practice situated in a given context, meanings of reception stem from symbolic constructions negotiated by the audience. Our assumption is that consuming the local press can provide routines of mediated interaction that link the displaced individuals to an imagined community (Anderson, 1991). Empirical evidence suggested early on that goal oriented or instrumental media use by foreign students was replaced on many occasions by a more "habitualized" reception focused on reading as a "ritualized communicative encounter" (Rubin, 1984). The national press functioned as a carrier of common symbolic resources for groups of displaced people, within which they continued to live out their cultural identities. Reading became a ritual when it served for individuals to explore alternative identities as well as for an imaginary community to trace its cultural beliefs (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1984).

Modern age has continually disconnected people from geographic regions, traditional spheres of home, place and identity, casting them into new environments. For diasporic audiences, identity, community and territory do not fit. Moreover, such notions are bones of contention in which contradictory definitions are posed. Global communication may be losing the power to gather

audiences together, to relate and to separate them in distinctive cultural groupings, basic for the processes of identity construction and maintenance (Ang, 1990). Unproblematic identities were tied to the traditional relationship between place and information access, and global media may be leaving the audience with "no sense of place" (Meyrowitz, 1985). In this context local media may allow reflections of a dispersed community on understanding key cultural marks.

Symbolic interaction with national media may give rise to different kinds of identities, relations and feelings, all constructed within a coherent system of meanings. The individual identity, a typical institution of "high modernity" (Giddens, 1991) persists through the ability to narrate one's life. Nowadays, identity is not an "essence" but an impression of identity that a self-narrative achieves when characterized by overall coherence, continuity and self-awareness of cultural interactions (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994, p. 197). Local media consumption may be assuming the socializing functions of the ritualistic narratives (Kellner, 1992): Offering role models, linking individuals to a cultural space, and celebrating community similarities and differences.

Especially in postmodern societies "community has to be made and remade, actively articulated... at once positioned and brought into being" (Whitt & Slack, 1994, p. 15). The concept of community grants a valuable mid-range theoretical analysis, relating micro-level concerns of subject formation to intersubjective concerns of social formations. A community depends on connection and linking functions, since it is often characterized as one unit of people bonded by a variety of shared circumstances - interests, customs, traditions, commitments... A worldview needs to be created by participating in a system of symbolic resources with their uses and meanings. Thus, individual identities are negotiated through interpersonal and mass mediated processes that also create and reveal the existence of a community based on a set of cultural premises (Philipsen, 1992). Only in this way is it possible to develop an understanding of self and social space that is also an understanding of a community to belong to and viceversa.

Identity as a basis of membership in a culture or a society results from a contrast of positively and negatively signed entities (Fitch, 1994, p.114). That is, cultural positioning implies validation of contested positions achieved through ratifications of audiences as cultural agents and rejections of other groups as such agents (Carbaugh, 1994). A symbolic linking both for similarities and differences helps to construct the problematic notions of I, we and they.

In brief, identity is both perceived and built within a definite social space or setting (i.e. symbolic, physical, territorial or political) in which certain identity marks (i.e. roles, feelings or beliefs) are socially expected and exhibited (Meyrowitz, 1985, pp. 7-8, 56-57). Nowadays, maybe more than ever, collective identity is endlessly (re)formed through processes of reification, inclusion and exclusion. That is, collective entities develop into symbolic realms that once reified in a discourse confer stability to the subjects' self-identities. In addition, that discourse is based upon a classification system inter alia. It allows the members of the community to define themselves against the others, defined as those beyond the boundaries of the common social space. Finally, it may also reproduce distinctions between us and them at the internal level in line with social divisions, relations of power and domination (Schlesinger, 1987, p. 261).

Method

Only ethnography exposes hidden meanings in connection with particular scenarios (Radway, 1984; Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; Morley, 1992, pp. 173-197). Our question is: Does local media interaction confers adherence to contested cultural identities?. Participant observation and ethnographic interviews were combined. While pretending to read the newspapers of my country, I observed the reading practices of the students.[ii] The data had little use unless complemented with the testimonies of the respondents. A pilot study with five ethnographic interviews helped to include themes unanticipated at the outset of the project.

Respondents were asked to recall their intentions, thoughts and feelings as they read.[iii] The ethnographic interviews aimed to motivate a linguistic interaction that creatively invoked cultural meaning systems through which participants constitute their cultural standings as members of a community. I aimed to <u>hear</u> mass mediated communal processes which are "historically grounded, culturally distinct, socially negotiated and individually applied" (Carbaugh, 1994, p.160). Therefore, a closer connection between the phenomenon under study (language use about cultural relationships) and the explanatory concept (cultural identity) was assumed (Ficht, 1994, p. 113).

For the interviews, I drew a sample of 27 foreign students from Europe (11), Asia (7), Africa (5) and South America (4) at a university library in the Midwest.[iv] They were contacted when seen for a second time during the five weeks period of field research. Almost half of the sample showed a weekly reading pattern. Therefore I analyzed those individuals who were most likely to show strong local media dependency. After they had read for an average of five minutes, I identified them by asking if the newspaper they were reading was from their own country. They showed differences regarding their studies, imminence of return to their countries, availability of alternative information sources and contacts with expatriates. These disparities were considered to minimize the possibility that important elements for media involvement would be overlooked.

Once I began the interviews the respondents were quite open and willing to talk, the average duration of the interview being about 45 minutes. I talked as little as possible letting the informants direct the discussion, and most did so. I focused the conversation by asking them to reconstruct the reading patterns that they had been displaying. There were differences in respect to English language proficiency, but a minimum was secured given the tests required to be accepted into a high ranking university. All the conversations were held in English, but for the Spanish speaking respondents who could resort to their mother tongue.[v] The tape recorded interviews were coded using the protocol developed by Strauss (1987). I analyzed individual sections of the text, to avoid overlooking potentially useful elements, whilst trying to identify categories into which the data could be grouped and to determine connections between these categories. As the coding process progressed, the search for commonalities pointed to some core categories (ritualistic media interaction, cultural identity, cultural space and community) that guided the final analysis.

Some methodological cautions were taken into account. What I present here are the discourses of the informants referring to the meanings of their reading activities. These discourses may have been mediated by my conceptual constructs. But we all shared similar ways of seeing and using

Grounding the displaced

the local media, since I was also a foreign student. Actually, this project began with my dispersed self-reflections about the communicative practices that constructed the positions of myself, others and my relations with the national and host cultures. Thus this research could be considered an example of autoethnography, or a study of my own group. However, the collected data do provide <u>symptoms and instances</u> of how other displaced audiences make sense of the local media as carriers of situated symbolic resources.

Media Rituals for Dispersed Identities

Engagement in the reception process seemed to be more important for the foreign students than fulfilling purposeful goals in a practical sense. Repetitive media encounters established a ritual link to the cultural space of origin. The respondents reaffirmed the viability of their self-identities by displaying certain roles in a symbolic realm more familiar than the host environment. Besides, the old news of the home nation confirmed the continuity of the cultural space into which re-entry would occur in a predictable and comprehensive manner. These symbolic practices were expressed in self-

narratives within which the students invoked cultural roles, positioned relative to cultural models and proving the interactional nature of identities.

<u>Rituals of Self-Positioning</u>

Most of the subjects stressed that they came to the library to read newspapers depending on the updating of the press issues and the hours of study at the library. Some students read every day and others read when feeling the pressure for "catching up" on lost time. Keeping precise intervals, they engaged an accumulative simulacrum of daily reception. I., a Russian interviewee, explained that his reading agenda was set by the two week period that it took the staff to replace the newspapers. But X., from Taiwan, came every day "... looking for relaxation when tired of studying or reading English... No matter if I have read them already". Many other students recognized a diversionary function, for example O. from Norway: "If I am stressed I come here and read the papers. It makes me feel good". Regular use, little selectivity, relaxation and pastime are some of the features a ritualistic media use (Rubin, 1984). Some respondents recognized their ignorance about their motives: "I always wonder why I am reading news which is older than one week" (Y. from Spain). On the other hand, other respondents voiced first hand instrumental purposes.

After a while it is impossible not to get curious about what is going on in your own country. Additionally, I have some stocks and I take a look to how prices are doing and what my decisions about them should be (W., Master's in Business Administration from Germany).

Unfocused curiosity about "what is going on" can be motive enough to "find oneself" reading old newspapers, but a clear use was argued "additionally". Although, W. had to compare the stock prices of the <u>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</u> with the updated ones in the <u>Wall Street Journal</u>. The German newspaper was of very little "use".

X. from Taiwan also manifested that seeking economic information was her main incentive. Actually, the newspaper satiated some more vague but deeper needs: "I will graduate very soon.

Grounding the displaced

Why I read newspapers so often is because I want to know some information about the industry and the employment opportunities. I want to find a job." When asked which were the classified advertisements that she had been reading, it turned out that the Taiwanese newspaper provided none. She could only gather a slight idea about her job opportunities: "I just want some general information about the manufacturers." Repetitive exposure to that "general information" seemed to fulfill the absence of overseas news, but its practical use was again almost null.

National sports news allowed the display of fan roles. J. from India, barely glanced at the front page before going straight to the sports section: "Cricket is my passion, politicians are not that interesting." But J. already knew most of the scores thanks to an "e-mail cricket club". He explained that "the newspaper tells the things in a different way. The spectators, the atmosphere at the matches and the minor incidents... It's a little bit like being there... That's not in e-mail." Once again, this student did not increase his information level in the traditional sense of news as updated factual knowledge. That was also the case of our South Korean interviewee:

I was reading one another time more that Korea was qualified for the World Soccer Championship. Actually, I am expecting that our soccer games will be in Chicago. There are some possibilities. So by reading this I know I have the chance of going and seeing them. And that makes me feel very well.

As Victor Turner noted (1980), a ritual is quite stereotyped behavior which is potent in terms of cultural conventions and that communicates the most cherished social values by allowing the participants to perform a role. All the students were returning to their countries in the near future. This possibly generated uncertainty that could be reduced by displaying roles of high social meaning for their cultures or subcultures. They engaged a vicarious experience of status (professional jobs) and cultural roles (sport fan roles), as maybe they used/wished to perform in their countries. Actually, they spoke of themselves as being able to perform as a German stock holder or a Taiwanese job searcher. J. just needed to "keep up with some renewed arguments... In a few days in India I will be ready to join the discussions and defend my cricket team." The South Korean soccer fan hoped to be capable of attending the matches together with his compatriots.

L. from England pointed to the newspaper reader role. One Monday, two weeks after the issue of the Sunday Times had been printed she said:

"It is nice to sit here and read the Times, because in London I get it every Sunday. Yes!. I am so familiar with the newspaper. I know where to look for the articles... I read it in the same way I do at home: I skim through the magazine and then I go through the paper."

Her next declaration revealed that the Times functioned as a carrier for an acquainted environment to find the news where "it was supposed to be": "In the Chicago Tribune it is impossible to get the news in the middle of such a mess of ads. By the time you find a news item you are lost." By reading the same sections of the paper in the identical order as she would in London, the local press provided her with a regularly ordered and familiar realm. Other media encounters maintained a strong similarity with "feeling at home". Most students stressed the significance of a linking function. T. from Japan stated:

Grounding the displaced

Sometimes I feel lost and I am hungry for Japanese words. And reading these characters, you know, makes me feel at home... a relief, and ah!, you know, it is very healthy to get in touch with Japan, even through the mass media [emphasis added].

Newspapers, even if old, were worth reading because "literature does not really connects you to nowadays reality" (P. from Denmark). The immediacy of the return to the home country motivated the "need to keep in touch with every fresh development" (X. from Taiwan). But news was old.

Old News, Good News

The ritualistic media experience also brought up discourses that gave significance to home cultural spaces by presenting them as familiar, stable and solid. Obviously, the newspapers did not cover informational needs in a proper way. Their delay was denounced by most of the interviewees and the reading practices were different in comparison to those displayed in a homeland context. For example, I. from Tanzania stated: "When I was at home I read only two or three articles. But now I read every single article, every single one." F., an Italian, noticed another variation in his reading patterns: "It is the opposite than in Italy. Here I go from the first page to the end, in Italy I did it backwards." At home he already knew the front page from television or radio. Now he had to perform that function for himself. First, he ordered the issues in a chronological sequence, afterwards, he could obtain a quick overview and select certain items looking at the leading articles. This self-reconstruction of a weekly media exposure conditioned his judgment about newspapers. "I find the paper worse here. Since I read only some issues a week, I discover how little they say. In Italy the other media did not let me realize how bad the newspapers really are."

Although, criticism was not at odds with cultural affinity. F. was kept completely absorbed by Corriere della Sera for an hour and a half, and afterwards he replied:

In national politics everything was exactly the same: The same people saying the same words. I do not have the feeling that anything has changed and it really relaxes me... you read that they have discovered another fraud, that the old parties remain in control of all the game... It is comforting. Seriously, you have the certainty that when you come back everything will be the same. I agree that good news would be much better: "Unemployment has gone down", "inflation did not increase"... but those are not my expectations. I am not going to think in negative terms about what I read, especially when I can get a relaxing effect. Things did not get worse.

Other students read the newspaper in order not to form an ideal picture of their countries. On the contrary, a "relaxing effect" was brought about by "same people saying the same words". E. from Ecuador stated that "from here [the U.S.] you realize that nothing really changed. For example, ministers change continuously, but they just switch posts. Names are not important". Noticing the journalistic conventions to present as news a limited number of actors performing small variations of the same play was a first step in developing an "oppositional reading" (Fiske, 1987). F. concluded: "Papers are made to get attention, they are exaggerating little political turns and talk now about revolution, which of course is not taking place". This skepticism was matched by the sarcastic touch of L., from London:

Grounding the displaced

While reading the press I get the impression that everything is just the same. I would be worried if it had changed. Just when you look at the headlines; there's nothing that I would say: "Oh my God, what has happened?. If something major had happened I would feel, 'Oh you missed it!'". I would be sort of left out. It is sort of keeping in touch with what is going on at home, because some events could be sort of a chunk of your mind missing when you are back. But the political scandals..., I want to know what John Major has messed up again.

"Keeping in touch" had a critical function: To avoid missing "chunks of your mind". The individual "mind" required to be collective, built in common with others in a continuous process. Prosecuted Italian leaders or the British political scandals were of no surprise to our readers. Usually, media surprises are absent in the homeland too. But being abroad, routinary press interaction was relaxing because it allowed readers' discourses that positioned them into coherent local environments. Relaxation arose from knowing that "so many things can happen at home that one never knows if it will ever be the same" (D. from Brazil). And the reassurance of an acknowledged cultural space secured self-identity: "Things change, definitely!. But I do not feel distance from them, because I keep a very close touch. Whenever I read I try to place things and myself on the background that I had before coming here" (R. from Senegal).

On many occasions the outcome was a discursive enhancement of cultural belongingness: "I am much more attached to my country now, that's why I follow the press" (S. from Morocco). Or utterances of identity reassurance could be heard: "I feel stronger after reading the press. I put myself in my place. Actually, after an hour of reading I do not know where I am anymore" (M. from Kenya). This last sentence bears a self-declaration of liminality: The state of in-betweeness that characterizes the performers of a ritual (Turner, 1969).

To summarize, most of the students enacted a ritual, disconnected from immediate uses. Local media consumption in a foreign context prompted a repeated discursive practice with increased cultural significance. This significance was not only due to practical motives dictated by a close return. Newspaper reading was meaningful in itself and the readers displayed well known roles; these roles were critical for positioning contested identities or for securing the viability of the new identities acquired abroad. The ratification that the national life was not altered yielded disappointment but also a great deal of stability. The ever similar media account of the students' cultural spaces confirmed that they had not missed anything "major" and that they had not been "left out". This holds that media consumption should rather be understood in terms of confirmation instead of information (Carey, 1989). Old news, good news.

Boundaries of Displaced Communities

A cultural space evolves and survives by being inhabited and shared in common, that is, in community. Community refers to a small, particular, informal and personal type of primary group relationship. In contrast, society is characterized by large, universal, formal and impersonal ties (Tönnies, 1957). The students invoked their affiliation to local communities pervading in a global society. The national press promoted a discursive interaction based on primary group ties, sharing a sense of identity, enduring strong emotional bonds, and sustaining localized and frequent symbolic interactions. However, mass media can only offer approximated versions of primary groups. Media pseudo-communities have been described as giving the

illusion of face-to-face relations with media celebrities (Merton, 1957, pp. 510-542), constructing a "social world" to belong to (Rubin, Perse & Powell, 1985, pp. 156-157), or providing primary-group ties (Beniger, 1987; Cerulo, Ruane & Chayko, 1992). But this "parasocial interaction" (Rubin & McHugh, 1987) also implies specifying who is, and is not, part of the <u>imagined community</u> (Anderson, 1991).

T. from Japan said: "I read the paper thinking about the people I know who might have read it two weeks ago". And A., from India explained:

There's definitely a lot of emotion involved. Especially when you first arrive and you want to continue following a lot of trails you had been following previously.... It has been kind of a personal contact. My father might have read this very same article at home.

G. from Greece provided another quite vivid illustration regarding a social report about Greek sons and daughters who leave the family home at very late ages. The student paid much attention to the article because her province was headlined as the one with the oldest ages. Her pleasure stemmed from recognizing an intimate reality:

The article makes references about people and things that I know because I am from there. The newspaper covers the testimony of one guy who had a twelve year long relationship. He was already thirty-seven and he couldn't marry until just two months ago. I immediately thought of my village, of everyone that I know who is getting married. The information even got me closer to my family. My younger sister got married just a few weeks ago...

The most invoked media <u>pseudo-communities</u> were <u>my family</u> or <u>my village</u>, but also <u>my friends</u>: "Well my friends over there follow the cricket league. Sometimes I look if I see them in the pictures taken at the fields." (J. from India); <u>my class mates</u>: "I was wondering if my old class mates at the graduate courses discussed that news about the latest labor conflicts" (K. from South Korea); or <u>my posse</u>[vi]: "I am quite positive that my friends were there... What a stupid way of joining them in the distance!", said L. from England after reading the schedules for pop-rock concerts. The local press helped to bridge individuals who were distant from each other in space and time, reconstructing communities they belonged to.

The <u>floating position</u> of the readers (Ang, 1985, p. 76), which for diasporic audiences is almost physically true, might have prompted the students to establish illusory bonds with the communities of origin. It is not a surprise that these declarations belonged to those interviewees who endured low or difficult interaction with U.S. citizens or with the expatriate community. Most of them also belonged to cultures where traditional primary groups (Southern Europe, Asia or Africa) or youth subcultures (England) bear a strong cultural significance. Obviously, they did not abandon letters and phone calls for the dailies, precisely because they established imaginary (pseudo-) encounters with their most cherished communities. This illusionary belief of simultaneous consumption of media texts was a fundamental premise for the formation of collective identities in the turn of the XXth. century (Anderson, 1991), and it may have become critical again.

Disregarding the notion of communities as given products of God, Spirit or History, we must address the origin of community boundaries. Collective identities are "invented" (Hobsbawm &

Grounding the displaced

Ranger, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1993) by defining certain social spaces and their memberships through symbolic borders for exclusive and inclusive functions. Exclusive boundaries are negative definitions made up in terms of rejecting difference. Inclusive boundaries are based on ratifying alleged similarity. While engaging the communal function of communication, foreign students put those distinctions into practice to position themselves and root their identities. They held some critical views of the host culture, and they also struggled to keep considering themselves as members of their social groups at home. Local media served as a symbolic scenario to confront "the others".

Exclusive Boundaries

Most of the subjects mentioned that reading newspapers reminded them of their status as foreigners. For example, T. stated: "The first thing you notice is how different we [the Japanese] are from Americans". And G. from Greece added:

I feel myself very different. I am going to adapt to this country and to these people [Americans] but I do not really want to be like them. When I go back or when I read these newspapers I see how different we are. This helps me to state myself, seeing where I come from and keeping it safe [emphasis added].

The majority of respondents did not plainly criticize the U.S. culture. Some examples were limited to comparisons between the American and the home based papers. A Russian student of Political Science declared:

When comparing you get the feeling that American media is very much controlled. Clinton's views are not criticized to the extent that they are in Russian media... I try to evaluate critically the facts that I learned previously from the American press. And I can tell you, the results are quite annoying.

This interviewee clearly applied his academic training in judging media content. Obviously, simultaneous and multi-

cultural media consumption favored critical readings too. Other strategies of comparison encompassed more than two cultures. K. from South Korea stated:

By reading social issues I can know what happens to our neighbor in [North] Korea... I can feel what the problems of my nation are. I also can compare Koreans [from the North and South] and Americans, reading the Chicago Tribune and these Korean papers. So I can draw conclusions about these nations.

Diasporic audiences that are drawn into multipolar communicative flows may recognize a wide variety of cultural identities in conflict. But local distinctions (North and South Korea) may depend on a world power (the U.S.) that serves as a reference to recognize and differentiate local identities. Reading the Chicago Tribune conferred meaning to those cultural spaces carried by the Asian press. Thus there is the risk of the most media salient cultural identities to become the unique points of reference for minoritarian identities, which formation may only resort to processes of subordination or, to the best, of hybridization.[vii]

Grounding the displaced

Clear defensive boundary building came mostly from students who were quite fluent in English. Linguistic competence allowed them to follow and recall the U.S. press coverage and its cultural traits, cross-cultural distinctions were made possible later on. Maybe other students held similar unspoken opinions and/or they lacked a point of reference to criticize. Also, the most common position, especially among the students from developing countries, was exemplified by M. from Kenya, who balanced exclusive distinctions and self-

criticism. Cultural distance fostered increased cultural belongingness and it also allowed for evaluating the home culture.

You never understand how much you belong to somewhere until you are not there anymore. I won't ever become an American, but I also see this with a more global view. My country is not perfect at all. I see the good and bad things more clearly than there [in Kenya].

<u>Inclusive Boundaries</u>

Foreign students were more concerned with maintaining links with their home communities than with rejecting the host culture. No wonder, since their displaced condition was voluntary. Our subjects are not comparable at all to economic immigrants or political refugees that conform the displaced multitudes for whom there might be <u>no home</u> again. Moreover, most students from developing countries took the same position as M. from Kenya who declared: "I intend to come back and do my best to change what I discovered here that is wrong in my country." These students had secured a return with higher professional standards than most of their compatriots. But at the same time, their new identity marks had to be compatible with the distinctions existing at the intra-national level, defining the social groups where they would live again. Inclusive boundaries showed their manifold nature in form of small territorial entities, generational, educational or political alignments.

Y. from Spain complained that <u>El País</u> was not printed in his town, wishing to read some newspaper from "my Pamplona where I belong and where I will return." K. from Korea stressed his aim of "keeping in touch" with

the young Koreans because they have changed a lot in the five years that I have been in the States. With the change of Government and politics, student life has changed a lot too. Politics is not the main interest any more. And I can read that from the papers and see that I feel kind of the same as the people of my age and what the other young people look like.

Then, media exposed him to the evolution of his age group, confirming that he still could be a part of it. The papers presented him the deepest traits of his generation ("life" and "interest") as well as the most trivial ones ("what the other young people look like"). Local information had become extremely useful to follow the shifting limits that defined home situated identities. That was also the case of C., an amateur Peruvian writer and a neophyte among the cultural elites of her country:

I do not want to lose touch. For instance, if I go back for a visit and find that I have <u>no context</u>, no knowledge of what has been up... You know, I don't want, for instance, to get into a conversation if I am not able to participate, because I am unaware. I do not want to sound like an

Grounding the displaced

American among <u>my own people</u> [emphasis added].

The press <u>context</u> was needed to re-establish social relationships and to avoid alienation from <u>one's own people</u>. Other inclusive distinctions acquired a conflictual tone. The Italian, F., a former subscriber of the Communist <u>Il Manifesto</u>, could only read a newspaper contrary to his ideology:

I hate this newspaper, it is too conservative, but I even go through it. I avoid the commentaries. Well, I read the first two lines until I see the kind of lies they tell... It is better than nothing. I do not know for which candidate I will vote since the parties have changed so suddenly. Anyhow, Italians are not allowed to vote through mail, so...

This arousal of ideological or partisan affiliation was compatible with realizing that he had been pushed out of the electoral process. Somehow, the critiques echoed the everyday small-scale political disputes, so common in Southern Europe. Actually, his final words were: "Oh, boy! I wish the comrades were here."

R. from Senegal offered an opposite but complementary example. Since his family belonged to the political elite, he used the press to maintain subsidiary discourse interactions that fortressed the inclusive boundaries of a community confirming his social competence. He focused on the news about one politician who had declared that he would not run for the next elections:

I had talked with his daughter, who is in Washington D.C., and she told me that he is actually thinking of leading a new political faction inside the Government. It is so funny, you know?. Tonight I will call her again and some other friends who are in the States. We are a few and knew each other before coming. I still feel competent and qualified to participate when I go back. Information flows, you know.

The phone calls between R. and his friends would reproduce within their class boundaries the gossiping of insiders that a ritualistic media use had fuelled. The words of Philip Elliott have been illustrated, "ritual is less a communication about social reality than a customary performance giving symbolic expression to social relationships" (1980:610). Reading the press guaranteed interaction with the compatriots, but mainly with those included within the same inclusive boundaries. Otherwise, back home there would be the risk of confronting new walls containing the identities and communities of age, education or class. Instead of cohesion there would be alienation. The inclusive borders would then turn out to be exclusive. Even R. from Senegal, who knew more than what the papers told him, declared that if he could not read the newspapers: "I would feel like in jail. I would not know what is happening <u>outside</u>. When in jail you want to go back, to become a member of the society. I would feel like in jail [emphasis added]". Also the insiders need to know "what is happening outside". Every inclusive boundary is complemented by others, the sum of them might constitute an encompassing collective identity, called nationhood.

Discussion

A scene from <u>Der Himmel über Berlin</u>, a film by Wim Wenders, could have been shot at the newspapers room where this research was conducted. Two fallen angels who risk becoming

Grounding the displaced

humans, stroll around the Central Library of Berlin. The soundtrack registers an endless mumble of illusions, hopes, fears and anxieties uttered by the readers in all languages. They do not read the books, but their own self: The one they want to escape from or the one they would like to possess. Foreign students interacting with their national newspapers composed a similar Babel. Quality papers from all over the world allowed the validation of socio-cultural positions through linking processes of interactional nature. Provoked by local media encounters, the displaced audience moved discursively between positions of difference and commonality with each position motivating the other.

I have argued (and hopefully showed) that local media interaction bears mainly a ritualistic cultural practice when performed in a foreign context. This ritual allows the diasporic audiences to display certain symbolic functions which are basic for identity positioning: (a) The symbolic role playing of cultural models, (b) the communal celebration of a cultural space, and (c) the adherence to a situated group through the ratification and the ratification of certain community linkages.

All these processes helped to construct a self-narrative characterized by overall coherence, continuity and awareness; that grounded and sustained displaced identities. Imaginary role playing of cultural models affirmed the viability of the identities. The audience could establish links to the cultural space whence they came, confirming that "everything was still the same". Thus a socially accepted claim of membership (identity) could be made, sharing common symbolic resources and nurturing self-stability. The audience also (re)constructed exclusive and inclusive encounters, building collective boundaries behind which to place itself.

Are there that many differences between a foreign students and a citizen who breakfasts with the network news every morning? This question remains open, but the findings show that mass communication goes further than the transmission of constantly renewed cultural products. It is also (mainly?) a ritual that enacts social meanings of identity reassurance and socio-cultural belongingness.

The core issue at stake is that local media may provide a sense of <u>ontological security</u> (Giddens, 1990), in our case, the confidence in the continuity of displaced self-identities and in the constancy of the cultural and social environments of action left behind. While global communication may disturb that confidence, local media, among other cultural carriers, may be one of its sustainers. Ontological <u>insecurity</u> prompts audiences to create themselves as viable social actors in the cultural setting of origin. Then, they must perform an <u>active</u> engagement, which is both <u>cognitive</u> (it requires recognition, memory, reflexivity) and <u>affective</u> (it requires stable relationships with other people and processes). Finally, ontological <u>insecurity</u> is always tamed through socio-cultural <u>mediations</u> to be sustained in the routinized activities of daily life (Silverstone, 1993, 1995).

Local media interaction seems to guarantee the cultural viability of displaced audiences by sustaining the routine character of communal life that is being altered by globalization. Actually, the press considered here is mainly informative and bears clear national roots. The news genre has been analyzed as an efficient source for the mediation of threat because of its narrativity, reliability and frequency (Silverstone, 1993, pp. 588-589). Partially for the same reasons,

Grounding the displaced

national media become part of the "taken-for-granted furniture of ordinary, daily existence". Moreover, there is an attempt to secure the effect for each and every member of the audience, that "you are being spoken to through messages made 'for anyone as someone like you'" (Scanell, 1995). "Being spoken" is a requisite for breaking with anonymity and acquiring an individual identity. And an essential condition for collective identities is that communication is maintained inside the borders of a given social space (Meyrowitz, 1985). It remains to undertake the task of showing the concrete textual formulae and media institutional conventions that may provide ontological security to the displaced multitudes of the present, specially for that majority for whom displacement becomes the only escape from repression or death.

A final issue may also be addressed: The tension that exists between cultural identities imposed "from above" and the ones that emerge "from below" (Hobsbawm, 1993; Martin-

Barbero, 1993). Applied to the global media, the top-down process refers to an elite that (de)codifies the media texts for others. Only they impose a common identity and establish community borders upon individual diversity. It is the practice of a caste system, like the former Catholic liturgy: The priest read the Latin Bible while turning his back to the faithful audience. Access to communication was granted only to those who possessed the text and knew the code. And there was a driven, single-meaning reading, that remained closed in its origin and in its destination.

To the contrary, the below-upwards model depicts local media reception as an individual and collective cultural practice, sensible to difference but performed in common by people whose identities live and survive thanks to their communicative efforts. Reception is a cultural practice with open, plural, creative and even subversive meanings. Probably, that was the birth of the Protestant sects and early patriotic fraternities in the eighteenth century, when the classics were translated into innovative readings. Nowadays, the global landscape might be producing communication flows that only feed themselves and, of course, their few producers. But the latter require situated audiences, without whom most global messages may sound like sermons in Latin.

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Footnotes at the end of the text

iI use <u>local</u> in contrast to <u>global</u>, referring both to the national and intra-national levels.

iiI focused on how much time the students spent, on their <u>manifest</u> degree of concentration (i.e. parallel activities, gazing, etc.) and on specific patterns of reading (i.e. choice of environment, chronological ordering of the issues, forwards or backwards reading, etc).

iiiOn some occasions recall was stimulated, by asking to describe more fully what they were thinking and feeling at certain points throughout the reading process. The informants often referred to specific news or sections they had been paying particular attention to and many continued to read while talking to the researcher. Obtrusiveness was partially avoided, by presenting myself as another foreign student who also read his national newspapers. This allowed me to stress empathy, and a fair degree of probing was granted referring back to the same topics from different perspectives and asking for concrete examples.

ivAlmost half of the subjects were males and the whole group were customary users of the foreign newspapers section. Their ages ranged from 18 to 32 years. The library belongs to the Northwestern University (Illinois) where the author spent many hours of study (sometimes only on the metamorphosis of lake Michigan) during his stay in 1993 and 1994.

vI provide an English translation of the Spanish speaking students. For the rest of the subjects I have respected their literal expressions, although in some cases there are incorrections and non-English expressions. The research setting was the foreign media facilities on the ground floor of the library. The seating area was divided into three spaces: The microfilm sets, which are irrelevant for our study, and two areas for reading newspapers - a group of twelve stools facing face a desk containing three or four newspapers from several countries, and eight tables with chairs. For convenience, only two respondents were interviewed in the stools area. The newspaper room followed the same schedule as the rest of the library. The number of foreign press readers ranged from a few to a dozen, which increased in the late hours of the afternoon. No snacking or loud conversation was allowed. However, the interviews could be audio taped. This environment certainly looked more distended than other areas of the library. It allowed for some degree of privacy, especially when seated at the tables.

viClan of customary individuals who attend to the same clubs.

viiMinority identities in order to become media salient may only resort to fusing dominant cultural forms - hybridization - or at the best to indigenization - infusing their own local features in the imported or imposed cultural forms (Lull, 1995, pp. 155-159).