

Cultural imperialism or vernacular modernity? Hindi newspapers in a globalizing India

Taberez Ahmed Neyazi

KYOTO UNIVERSITY

The theory of cultural/media imperialism¹ has received great scholarly attention, especially after the Frankfurt School's characterization of mass media as a tool of 'mass deception', which works for commercialized interests (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). It argues that there is a domination of American-based cultural flow carried through media, particularly in developing countries, which has not only resulted in cultural homogenization, but also the in spread of consumerist ideology (Herman and McChesney, 1997; Mattelart, 1983; Ritzer, 1996; Schiller, 1976). Interest in the theory of media imperialism has been renewed recently with the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, concomitant with the acceleration of the process of globalization and fears of domination of American and Western ideologies and viewpoints promoted through the worldwide expansion of global media. Despite criticisms, the theory of media imperialism still holds sway in much academic discourse.² While criticizing the cultural homogenization thesis, Appadurai argues that 'the United States is no longer puppeteer of a world system of images, but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes' (1996: 31). Thussu (2007), although he recognizes the contra-flow of information from erstwhile peripheries, argues that it is the North, with the United States at its core, that still dominates the global media flow in terms of volume and economic value.

At macro level, the theory of media imperialism might be true in terms of dominance of media business by the US-based media firms. However, what such a view ignores is the autonomy of local media producers, who, despite giving an impression of reproducing the global content locally, in fact incorporate several elements which have been indigenously produced in global form.

Media, Culture & Society © The Author(s) 2010, Reprints and permissions:
<http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav> Vol. 32(6): 907–924
 [ISSN: 0163-4437 DOI: 10.1177/0163443710379664]

This article, through a micro-level study, unravels how the rise of Hindi newspapers in a globalizing India compels us to rethink 'media imperialism' as a theory. While questioning the concept of media imperialism, the article also conceptualizes the rise of Hindi newspapers as what I have termed 'vernacular modernity', which is the critical appropriation of Western modernity reproduced in indigenous form. By adopting technological innovation and being sensitive to local cultural values, Hindi newspapers have been able to provide hybrid content to their readers. Such a hybrid content is sensitive to the vernacular realm of Hindi publics while incorporating a modern outlook and values.

This is done through a case study of *Dainik Bhaskar* (The Daily Sun), a Hindi-language newspaper that claims to be the most widely read in India. The structural development and expansion over the years of *Dainik Bhaskar* exemplifies the dominant position that Hindi news media have come to occupy in a globalizing India. Negotiating this transformation in the larger social, political and economic landscape, Hindi newspapers have reconfigured themselves and adapted their content by appropriating the language of modernity, once exclusively claimed by English-language newspapers. By using Western technology and adhering to indigenous cultural values and resources, Hindi newspapers are providing hybrid content to their readers in a hyper-competitive media environment. This has enabled them to present and sustain an alternative discourse in the public arena which is parallel to the elite discourse mediated through English-language news media. The study shows that Hindi newspapers, and the people who produce them, have an initiative, autonomy and presentation style – a 'vernacular modernity' – that undermines any crude theory of 'cultural imperialism'.

The article is divided into four parts. First, it briefly outlines the rise of the vernacular media and the position of Hindi newspapers in contemporary India. Second, it discusses the notion of vernacular modernity by situating the debates within the larger discourse of modernity. In the process, it also critiques the idea of cultural imperialism through empirical example. Third, it outlines the brief history of *Dainik Bhaskar*, and discusses the strategies of aggressive marketing and localization that helped the newspaper to achieve success and expand beyond its own territory. Finally, the article explores the implications of the rise of Hindi newspapers for Indian society and culture, and how it contributes to simultaneous empowerment of the local citizens as well as commodification of news.

The media scene in India

An overview of the literature on Indian news media shows that the English-language media, which dominated national media market from independence till the late 1990s, is no longer the dominant market player (Jeffrey, 1993, 2000; Ninan, 2007; Rajagopal, 2001; Stahlberg, 2002). The booming Hindi news media industry testifies to the fact that vernacular media pose a serious

challenge to the dominance and authority of English-language media in the public sphere. As many as 23 Hindi news channels have been launched since 2000. At the same time, according to the 2006 National Readership Survey (NRS), there is not a single English-language newspaper in the top ten in terms of readership. The *Times of India*, the largest English-language newspaper figured at number 11, with a readership of 7.4 million, while *Dainik Jagran* and *Dainik Bhaskar*, the top two Hindi newspapers, have a readership base of 21.16 and 20.95 million respectively. Similarly, the NRS 2006 reported that vernacular dailies have grown from 191 million readers to 203.6 million, while English-language dailies have stagnated at around 21 million.

Furthermore, the reach of Hindi media is not confined to north India, where Hindi is widely used; they have also penetrated other parts of India. The sheer number of Hindi speakers, 40.22 percent of India's population, demonstrates the significance of Hindi as India's *lingua franca*.³ What are the implications of such a massive growth of Hindi news media for Indian society? Has it led to the empowerment of the marginalized sections of the society or has it created fragmentation in the public sphere? The importance of the rise of vernacular media goes beyond just success in the marketplace, and figures as a means of achieving self-respect and national pride in the context of a globalizing India. This further poses the question of the role of media in creating strong 'vernacular' identities and their relation to the forces of globalization. Before answering these questions, it would be pertinent to ask why and how Hindi newspapers have grown. Jeffrey (1993, 2000) has documented the reasons for the growth of Indian-language newspapers, which he attributes to five factors: (a) the rise of capitalism; (b) the communications revolution; (c) the growth of advertising industry; (d) the rise in literacy levels; (e) interest in the political news.

Jeffrey also contends that, through the process of localization, facilitated by the communications revolution, Indian-language newspapers were able to penetrate the hinterland and expand their readerships. A similar study by Ninan (2007) also highlights the rise of Hindi newspapers through the process of localization. However, she has rushed to the conclusion that the process of localization has been overtaken by the process of delocalization, by which she meant the process of cleansing the system of the corruption in journalism that arose because of localization. Thus she argues that 'basic news ethics was revived, planted stories were eliminated, and circulation, reporting and advertising functions separated' (2007: 139). One could easily question the description of the Hindi newspaper revolution provided by Ninan, as it gives the impression that the process of localization is already complete and there is now a drive towards 'delocalization' to bring back journalism ethics. Far from it, the process of localization and delocalization is an ongoing project, which will continue until the Indian media landscape stabilizes.

Through a micro-level study, Stahlberg has analyzed the overall status of Hindi newspapers and journalists and their work in the north Indian city of Lucknow. He provides significant insight in understanding the cultural

production of news and the intricacies involved in news production. His study enables him to assert that Hindi newspapers have come to occupy an important place in north Indian politics and society. All these studies, with the exception of Stahlberg, while they are significant contributions to the understanding of Indian-language media, have not been able to provide insights into the mechanisms and processes through which Hindi newspapers have influenced the local society and culture. By carrying out a micro-level study focusing on *Dainik Bhaskar*; this article attempts to understand the process and implications, of the rise of Hindi newspapers at the local level, and how this contributes to a better understanding of what 'modernity' means in the 21st century.

Cultural imperialism or vernacular modernity?

The resurgence of Hindi newspapers has made it difficult for English-language newspapers to continue their dominance over the social, cultural and political spheres in postcolonial India.⁴ It has also resulted in widening the political and cultural space available for the hitherto marginalized groups who could not participate in 'national' public sphere because of a certain dominant mode of discourse and the hegemony of the English-speaking 'national' elite.

The discursive domain emanating from Hindi newspapers helps in formulating and shaping public opinion and acts as an important channel for the public to raise their grievances and hold the state more responsible. However, many scholars view the rise of Hindi newspapers as part of the rise of communal and identity politics in India and hence doubt its role as a vehicle of democratization (Hasan, 1998; Rajagopal, 2001). To draw from Rajagopal, one might well characterize the English-reading and Hindi publics as 'split publics' – split between communal and secular, progressive and reactionary, orthodox and modern publics.⁵ However, I would argue that the space for civic discourse exists in the Hindi newspapers and publics as their recent growth, especially since the mid 1990s, has not been fuelled by major communal events such as the Ayodhya movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Rather, it is because of the rise in levels of literacy, aggressive marketing strategies, better transportation infrastructure, the rising political significance of the Hindi publics and an awareness among the masses that they are able to participate in the political process. This has enabled Hindi-language newspapers to critically appropriate the language of modernity and reproduce it in their own language, drawing from local cultural resources, which gives them a dual advantage: that of being sensitive to indigenous culture and values and of producing global modernity in indigenous form. As some scholars argue, globalization also pushes local people to find the 'local' that they have neglected or forgotten in their drive towards Western-imposed modernization

during past decades (Featherstone, 1993; Robertson, 1995; Shim, 2006). Thus, the reflexivity that has developed also opened up the opportunity to reinterpret and reconstitute the common institutional and cultural premises of modernity.

The project of modernity as developed in Europe from the 17th century onwards was largely concerned with making a break with the past by modernizing arts, literature, culture and religion. The quintessential aspects of modernity include a respect for individual freedom, the belief in human beings' ability to decide their destiny, and the adoption of science and technology (Giddens, 1990; Habermas, 1990). When it comes science and technology, there is hardly any opposition: even forces opposed to the West adopt them with fervor (Tibi, 1998). The real arena of contestation is in the field of cultural aspects of modernity, which has also provided space for fundamentalist forces to push their values against Western values, evoking a reaction even among those only remotely concerned with fundamentalist values. Yet one cannot ignore the creation of this awareness, which leads to the reinterpretation of the core transcendental visions of modernity in light of the specific cultural heritages and socio-political conditions, in 'multiple modernities', as Eisenstadt (2000) calls them. Taylor (1999) has also criticized the cultural-neutral theory of modernity, which privileges European experience as the only way of being classed as modern. He therefore argues that 'instead of speaking of modernity in the singular, we should better speak of "alternative modernities"' (p.162). While developing the idea of vernacular modernity, the current research draws upon the idea of multiple modernities and alternative modernities, and situates the discourse within particular social and cultural milieus.

Hindi newspapers have adopted the latest technology as a key instrument of growth and expansion. They now provide an alternative platform of participation to those who have been overlooked by English-language newspapers. Robertson has critiqued the idea of modernity that supports 'a general homogenization of institutions and basic experiences in a temporal, historical mode' (1995: 27). Appadurai and Breckenridge similarly contended that 'most societies today possess the means for the local production of modernity' (1995: 1). Likewise, Therborn (1995) identified the autonomous development of modernity in areas outside Europe. What is distinct about the experience of vernacular modernity produced as a result of the rise of Hindi newspapers is their ability to draw from local cultural resources while adopting state-of-the-art technology, often imported from the West.

By using the latest technology, Hindi newspapers have created a design and layout which are a match for global standards, yet they have adopted an approach of gradualism and particularism when deciding on content. While *Dainik Bhaskar* provides coverage of global and national celebrities, they are reconfigured to accord with the taste and orientation of local society. For example, one can easily find photos of Madonna in a Hindi newspaper, but Madonna is repackaged in accordance with the preferences and prejudices of local society.

The vernacular modernity produced as a result of rise of the Hindi media is a hybrid form of global and local, foreign and indigenous, elite and vernacular. Such hybridization strategies have enabled the producers of Hindi news media to fight against the dominance of English-language news media by creating a vernacular modernity. Hindi media industry spokespersons such as Rahul Dev claim that the importance of the rise of vernacular media goes beyond success in the marketplace and figures as a means of achieving self-respect and national pride in the context of India's globalization.⁶ One cannot discount the highly politically motivated orientation of such a claim. At the same time, it is important to understand the complex relations between the forces of modernity, and to understand the political potential inherent in hybridity following Bhabha's (1994) observation that natives and minorities strike back at imperial domination by recourse to the hybridization strategy. Such is the effect of the rise of the Hindi news media that, perhaps for the first time, English-language news media must seriously consider the challenges posed to their dominance over the social, cultural and political spheres in postcolonial India.

While appropriating the content of English-language newspapers, Hindi newspapers customize and reconfigure it, taking into account particularities in local society. Thus, without tampering with the main pages of *Dainik Bhaskar*, *City Bhaskar*, a four-page supplement, was started in 2005 to meet the rising demand of readers for more information about lifestyle and glamour. One might well ask: who are the readers demanding such stories? Is the market dictating the terms of discourse that has to be carried in the print-mediated public sphere? Are we witnessing cultural imperialism under the guise of such changes introduced by *Dainik Bhaskar*? It is pertinent here to discuss a story about Celina Jaitley, a model and film actress, that preoccupied *Dainik Bhaskar* in May 2001. On 26 May 2001, *Dainik Bhaskar* printed on the first half of the front page a revealing photograph of Celina Jaitley when she was a finalist in the Miss Universe contest. After the newspaper reached readers early in the morning, the office of *Dainik Bhaskar* started to receive phone calls criticizing the publication of such a photo on the front page. Readers complained that the photograph was morally outrageous, and that they did not want to see such things on the front page. Some parents complained that newspapers are also read by children and, if they see such photographs regularly, it would be morally hazardous for them. Several readers cut out the photograph and posted it back to *Dainik Bhaskar*. Such protest was unexpected and the editor had to write an apology the following day, saying that he would be more careful in future and asking readers to continue their support for the newspaper. There was also an immediate meeting of editors with all the women journalists working in *Dainik Bhaskar*. The majority of them did not find the photograph of Celina Jaitley indecent, but agreed that the photograph should have gone into the inside pages.

This incident led to the development of a policy within *Dainik Bhaskar* that a photo that might be offensive to the sensibility of readers should be

placed on the inside pages. In light of this example, one can clearly notice that readers critically analyse and react to the message coming to them through media, rather than being passive receivers of message. Media producers are well aware of the fact that one cannot distribute the same content to all readers located in different places. In order to respect the sensibilities of the readers in small towns and rural areas, the content of *Dainik Bhaskar* is customized keeping in mind the cultural specificity of such areas, which is definitely different from urban culture. This is quite evident when we look at the Bhopal (city) and Itarsi (small town) editions of *Dainik Bhaskar*. Despite the existence of commonalities in terms of content, there are also differences in the presentation of some stories. For example, some of the photos, which might give an impression of vulgarity in a semi-rural setting, are omitted from the Itarsi edition, while they are present in the Bhopal edition. Commenting on this aspect of localization, Pankaj Srivastav, a sub-editor in *Dainik Bhaskar*, explained that: '*jo photos Bhopal ke context mein asani se accept kar liya jata hai, woh photo Itarsi mein tamasha ban jayega*' [Those photos which are easily acceptable in the Bhopal edition, will be source of contention in the Itarsi context].⁷

In light of the above discussion, it is pertinent here to analyse the growth of *Dainik Bhaskar* and the reasons behind its success. This success reflects the growing popularity and purchasing power of the vernacular realm and the development of vernacular modernity.

Highlighting the local: the *Dainik Bhaskar* way

From the time of its establishment in Bhopal in 1958, *Dainik Bhaskar* was confined to Madhya Pradesh for nearly four decades until 1995. Today it is the second most widely read newspaper in India after *Dainik Jagran*, with an estimated 20.95 million readers. It holds prime position in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chandigarh and Haryana. The present chairman, Ramesh Chandra Agrawal, who stepped into his father's shoes in 1978, has driven the success of the newspaper. The Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984, which killed around 20,000 people (Eckerman, 2005; Shrivastava, 1992), helped *Dainik Bhaskar* to establish its credentials in Madhya Pradesh as a paper for the people. In the wake of the Bhopal gas tragedy, *Dainik Bhaskar* aligned itself with the cause of the people affected and criticized the mishandling of the situation by the government. The critical approach adopted by the newspaper provoked the wrath of the government, and government advertising was stopped for some time. Thus, Ramesh Chandra Agarwal explained that:

the government at that time was trying to stifle information regarding the gas tragedy. We made a point that people were provided with the true story on the Bhopal gas tragedy and we did it. We took a stand against the government and highlighted the voice of the people.⁸

Similarly, Mahesh Shrivastav, former editor of *Dainik Bhaskar*, remarked that: 'in the wake of Bhopal gas tragedy, the people of Bhopal realized that it is *Dainik Bhaskar* that can support their causes and concerns, and work for the development of the city'.⁹ The success of *Dainik Bhaskar* was visible after the gas tragedy, as circulation grew in parallel with the support of the local people. Thus, the initial strategy was to establish the newspaper's credentials and popularity among the local people as Agrawal: 'realized that, without having support in their homeland, it would be difficult for the paper to achieve success outside'.¹⁰

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a very important period in the history of Hindi newspapers. This was when the Ram Janmabhumi–Babri mosque controversy¹¹ was at its peak and the major Hindi dailies played a leading role in supporting the cause of the Hindu nationalist movement. Thus, in the debates on media and democracy, the resurgence of Hindi newspapers was not unanimously welcomed (Stahlberg, 2002: 4). Scholars expressed concern over the rise of Hindi newspapers, which became synonymous with 'Hindu' newspapers, indicating the orientation of Hindi newspapers in support of the cause of Hindu chauvinist forces. One cannot ignore such apprehensions, as evidence shows that major Hindi newspapers engaged in exaggerated reporting during the Ram Janmabhumi–Babri mosque controversy, which further stirred up the communal frenzy. In its December 1991 Ayodhya judgment, the Press Council of India also criticized the Hindi press for 'offending the canons of journalistic ethics' (Press Council of India, 1991: 338–9).

While major Hindi newspapers were supporting Hindu chauvinist forces and engaging in irresponsible and biased reporting during this time, *Dainik Bhaskar* was expanding and improving its content. In 1992 *Dainik Bhaskar* established itself as the leading newspaper in Madhya Pradesh. In the wake of communal riots that broke out in Bhopal following the demolition of the Babri mosque on 6 December 1992, *Dainik Bhaskar* appealed to people to maintain communal harmony.¹² Unlike a number of other Hindi newspapers, *Dainik Bhaskar* adopted a liberal and secular approach during the Ram Janmabhumi–Babri mosque controversy and was able to establish a base among the Muslim population, which is nearly 40 percent of the total population of Bhopal.

However, the most important aspect that emerges from the success of *Dainik Bhaskar* is the changing nature of Hindi journalism. News has been commodified to attract readers. Consumerism, driven by glitzy advertising, is seeping into the countryside and Hindi newspapers have played a major role in this process. Besides highlighting local issues and aspirations, aggressive marketing and localization are other important factors that led to the success of *Dainik Bhaskar*. It must be noted that *Dainik Bhaskar* was the first Hindi newspaper to try aggressive marketing as a strategy to expand its base and readership.

Aggressive marketing and repackaging the vernacular

For a very long period, marketing strategy was used by the English-language newspapers in India to increase their circulation and readership. The *Times of India*, a leading English-language daily of India, invented the marketing strategy in the mid-1980s to grow and expand in a competitive media environment. However, the vernacular newspapers have already started to appropriate marketing strategies which remained the exclusive domain of English-language media until the 1980s. For my current research, I confine my discussion to the Hindi-language newspapers and their experience of appropriation of marketing strategies in order to expand their social base to ensure that Hindi newspapers can also be bought and purchased by a reader of English-language newspapers. This transformation in the social perception of the people, which began at the end of the 20th century, was very important, as readers of English-language newspapers had an image of being modern, whether this was real or imaginary. By encroaching upon the domain of English-language newspapers as the exclusive conduit of modernity, the Hindi newspaper created a vernacular modernity which contributed to initiating a paradigmatic change that also opened up the space for the marginalized classes to participate in the global circulation of modernity.

Dainik Bhaskar employed a strategy of aggressive marketing to expand the newspaper's base outside of Madhya Pradesh in the mid 1990s. Thus, in October 1995, they identified Rajasthan as a potential market. However, the decision was viewed as risky and non-rewarding as 'Bennett, Coleman & Co. had just shut down the Jaipur edition of *Navbharat Times* on the grounds of non-viability' ('Sunrise Daily', 2001: 99). Moreover, *Rajasthan Patrika* dominated the newspaper market in Rajasthan, and there was strong presence of other Hindi newspapers such as *Rashtrdoot* and *Nav Jyoti*. Yet, in spite of this market situation, the Agarwal family launched its Rajasthan edition from Jaipur on 19 December 1996. A span of 14 months was devoted to a massive survey of the 175,000 households in Jaipur, almost 50 percent of the total population and 100 percent of total readerships. The survey aimed to understand people's preferences, reading habits and expectations from a newspaper (Sinha and Pariher, 2002).

It was these multi-pronged marketing strategies that helped *Dainik Bhaskar* to make an entry into the newspaper market in Rajasthan and to overtake *Rajasthan Patrika*, which has been the leading daily since 1956. The success was very important for Bhaskar Group; in their first venture outside the state of Madhya Pradesh, the Group was able to challenge *Rajasthan Patrika*, which had almost monopolized the market for 40 years, with 65 percent readership in Rajasthan and 80 percent of the readership in Jaipur (Sinha and Pariher, 2002). This was the first time in the history of Hindi print media that

a publisher employed marketing strategies to capture a new market, and thus the newspaper was being sold in the same way as any other consumer goods. This poses a serious question about the media and journalism ethics, and the issue of globalizing consumerism, as the drive for aggressive expansion is essentially driven by the fact that newspapers have to create audiences whom they can sell to advertisers at a time when television is rapidly taking advertising revenue away from the newspapers. These issues will be addressed later in this article. The success in Jaipur prompted the Bhaskar Group to expand into other regions: currently *Dainik Bhaskar* has a presence in nine states across north India.

While explaining the sources of their style of functioning, Girish Agrawal remarked: 'We have borrowed aggressiveness from the Times Group, networking from *Eenadu*, and content from *The Hindu*' (quoted in 'Sunrise Daily', 2001: 99). The two role models that *Dainik Bhaskar* follows are *USA Today* and the *Times of India (ToI)* Group. Sudhir Agrawal states that:

It was *USA Today*, which interacted with its readers in shaping the newspaper, and then it also announced to the world well in advance that it would be hitting the stands on an appointed date. We also did the same thing in Jaipur. Then we have also emulated *ToI*'s aggressive marketing approach and the fact that it's always doing something fresh. (quoted in 'New King on the Block', 1999: 107)

The *Dainik Bhaskar* Group has been open to learning and adopting approaches of successful newspapers in different countries. Such an approach of investing energy in researching successful newspapers and adopting their strategies has certainly helped *Dainik Bhaskar* to succeed in the media market. The success of *Dainik Bhaskar* has also created a sense of confidence among the Hindi public, as they are now receiving the same content as English-language newspapers, repackaged in an indigenous form. Using marketing strategies to achieve success might be criticized by some media critics, but one cannot ignore the potential inherent in such strategies, of providing voices to hitherto marginalized sections of society. The next section unravels the complexities of marketing strategies by looking at the process of localization and its impact on the local society.

Localization as a strategy of success

The process of localization has greatly helped Indian-language newspapers to achieve success and retain their advertisement revenue in the face of competition from television news channels. It must be noted that Hindi newspapers competed with English-language newspapers until the 1970s by publishing their editions in urban centers, where most of the English-language readers

resided. It took more than three decades for Hindi proprietors to go looking for readers in the smaller towns and rural areas. Thus, Hindi newspapers started localization in the 1980s, which was greatly facilitated by the communication revolution. The process of localization not only helped in providing customized news suited to a particular local society, it also contributed to effective competition against television, which was eating away at the advertising revenue of newspapers.¹³

The process of localization started by Hindi newspapers involved decentralizing production, distribution and consumption. It was made possible because of the arrival of the new technology and the information and communication revolution in the mid-1980s. Rajiv Gandhi, who became prime minister in 1984, was in favor of the development of modern technology and 'promoted indigenous business in semi-conductors, telecommunications, computers, and computer software'.¹⁴ However, with the onset of economic reforms and rapidly emerging globalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, the process of localization has been accelerated. Jeffrey (2000: 51–74) has well illustrated *Eenadu's* success in localizing the newspaper, and creating a new base for local advertising from retailers, small business and sometimes from unexpected sources, such as mourning the death of prized pets and working farm animals.

The localization of production involves decentralizing newspaper production units. Previously, newspapers were produced from a single center and then distributed to different places. This was expensive and time-consuming. However, with the setting up of multiple production centers, newspapers were printed simultaneously from different places. The development of off-set printing technology, computers and the internet has helped owners of the newspapers to effectively decentralize their production. The localization of distribution has multiplied distribution centers and located them in previously remote areas, to ensure that people in the hinterland get the newspaper early in the morning. Localization of consumption involves taking news to the grassroots by including local happenings, such as crimes, marriages and inauguration ceremonies, obituaries, etc. *Dainik Bhaskar* employs large numbers of local stringers, who need not be specialists in journalism, to send news from small towns and villages to be published in pages tailored for particular districts and towns.

Another important area in the process of localization was the beginning of *Upcountry City Bhaskar*, a four-page weekly pullout covering lifestyle and local happenings peculiar to particular corners of the countryside, targeted at youth and women. This concept is unique and has not yet been tried by any other Hindi or English-language newspaper, as 'upcountry' is usually considered less desirable for consumer oriented lifestyles – country people are thought to have less money to spend. Commenting on the notion of *Upcountry City Bhaskar*, Mukul Gupta, who is in charge of it, told me:

usually in the local pullouts, we publish routine news and provide information to the readers, rather than giving something for entertainment. Keeping in view the changing expectation of the readers from a newspaper, we have come out with this idea, and providing them stuff that would not only inform them, but also entertain them. In those four pages we are not going to talk about *garibi* (poverty), *neta* (politicians) and *kheti* (agriculture). The content would exclusively be positive, directed to create feelgood among the readers, with inspirational stories about the local heroes who have moved forward in life with struggle, rather than corruption.¹⁵

Keeping in view 'conservative' lifestyles of the countryside as compared to the city, *Dainik Bhaskar* is careful and moves slowly, rather than making any radical move that might alienate readers. Thus, Mukul Gupta mentioned: 'we are not going against the *sanskriti* [culture], but focusing on urban *lifestyles*. This shows that *Dainik Bhaskar* emphasizes local specificities, while trying to introduce new ways to attract readers. However, there is a conscious effort to introduce urban *lifestyles* into rural areas to create audiences for consumer products. This will help the newspaper to attract more advertisements.

Localization helped Hindi newspapers to target different audiences more effectively than before. This enabled them to cash in on the local market and businesses for advertising. As the outlook of television is largely national, regional and local spaces have mostly remained unoccupied and are now being appropriated by Indian-language newspapers. However, the fight for regional markets has already begun with the coming of regional satellite channels such as Sahara TV and ETV.

Dainik Bhaskar has been successful in highlighting regional aspirations and local sensibilities by localizing the newspaper. Instead of making national events the lead story, *Dainik Bhaskar* presents local or regional issues as the lead story. National issues do not find a space as the lead story unless it is breaking news or a cricket story. Kalpesh Yegnik, Indore-based political editor of *Dainik Bhaskar*, attributes the newspaper's success to effectively understanding the readers and their sensibilities:

Rather than just imitating the English-language newspapers, we highlight those issues which our readers would be able to understand, as our target readers are very different from English-language newspaper readers. We are the mass newspaper and our base is spread across all the sections of society – from lower middle class to higher strata of society, including bureaucrats and policy-makers.¹⁶

This clearly reflects that the Hindi newspaper is not simply imitating English-language newspapers, but that the content is customized to suit the needs of their readers. The following section will discuss the implications of localization to provide a nuanced understanding of the rise of Hindi-language newspapers.

Localization: commodification or empowerment?

One of the important questions to emerge here is how far localization is leading towards the empowerment of citizens. In other words, has localization created meaningful discussion in the public sphere or has it resulted in the commodification of news? My argument is that localization has led to both empowerment of citizens and, simultaneously, a commodification of news.

To analyse the dynamics of localization, I spent time in Itarsi, a small town with a population of around 121,000 located 79 km to the south of Bhopal. Itarsi is located in Hoshangabad district and is a commercial center for agricultural goods. It also has the biggest railway junction in Madhya Pradesh. The reason for selecting Itarsi in order to carry out fieldwork was to understand the impact of localization in a small town, as the growth of Hindi newspapers, as Jeffrey argues, is said to be driven by their ability to expand their bases in small towns and rural areas.

How far has the localization of newspapers helped in creating meaningful debates and discussions at the local level? Has it revealed genuine problems in the public sphere or has it become an instrument of manipulation in the hands of local journalists who are using it for their own self-interests?

Let me first highlight some empirical evidence from my fieldwork. The evidence comes from a *Kasba*¹⁷ called Sohagpur, 40 km to the east of Itarsi. The area was affected by a flood in the months of August and September 2006. The news of the flood and the people affected by it was regularly covered by *Dainik Bhaskar*. Abhinay Soni was the stringer for *Dainik Bhaskar*, who sent news about local events. Besides working as a stringer, he had been a full-time employee in a local English-medium school since 2000. He joined *Dainik Bhaskar* in April 2005 and since then he has been regularly sending news about happenings in Sohagpur and nearby villages. He has installed an internet connection at his home, allowing him to send news directly to the Bhopal office.

During the flood he wrote a special report on the dire situation of the nearby villages, and about the people who escaped from it and took shelter at a government school in Sohagpur. The headline on the story, which appeared on 3 September 2006, was run as 'Jalastar Utra, Khatra Tala' ['The Level of Flood Water Receded, Danger Averted']. However, in the very same story he mentioned a person named Dhanraj, who had taken shelter since 14 August in a make-shift camp in the compound of a government school. The condition of Dhanraj was deteriorating, and he was suffering from fever. The story appeared on the front page of the four-page pullout for Itarsi, with his photo. The text warned local administrators and asked them to provide immediate help or Dhanraj might lose his life. After the story was published, the administration acted and Dhanraj was asked to visit *Tehsil* (local administrative division) office to collect the necessary help. Since

Dhanraj was unwell, his wife Anita went to the *Tehsil* office on 4 September to get help in the form of money or food. However, when she reached the *Tehsil* office, she was informed that her husband had passed away. The next day, Abhinay Soni had another by-line on the front page with the headline 'Antat: Mar Gaya Dhanraj' [At Last: Dhanraj Died]. The story was published with a micro-copy of the previous story, which warned the administration of this possibility. The story highlighted the administration's lackadaisical attitude that eventually resulted in Dhanraj's death. Moreover, instead of asking Dhanraj to come to the *Tehsil* office for help, the administration could have sent someone directly to Dhanraj. These were the questions raised in the story. The next day people blocked the main road in protest against the administration's mishandling of the situation. Later, Dhanraj's wife, who had a 5-year-old daughter, received Rs. 20,000 as compensation; she also got a clerical job in a local government office.

The incident raises many questions about the viability and influence of the localization of newspapers. It is evident that, because of the publication of the story in the local edition, the administration came to know about the condition of Dhanraj and tried to assist him. While the delay in providing help may have resulted in the death of Dhanraj, it also provoked the people to protest against the administration and to apply further pressure to help the deceased's family. It can thus be argued that, without localization, it would have been almost impossible for the issue to attract such wide attention and Anita could not have got justice. As the news published in the local pullout goes to the district collector and the local members of the legislative assembly, and is widely read within the district and nearby town, the local administration was pressurized to take action. It would be naïve to undervalue such influence resulting from localization of newspapers. The process has created awareness among the citizens and enabled them to unite, from time to time, to protest against injustice.

Localization has definitely helped hitherto marginalized groups to participate in the public sphere. At the same time, it has also resulted in the commodification of news as, on many occasions, media producers publish trivial news with dramatized content. Therefore, instead of generalizing that localization necessarily leads to commercialization, one needs to analyse the complexity inherent in the process of localization. By creating a new constituency of readerships, localization has provided a voice for those who, until recently, were unable to effectively raise their concerns in the public sphere and remained at the margin of mainstream discourse. Media scholars might regard the content of Hindi newspapers as another form of cultural imperialism, that is, the imposition of urban culture in rural areas, disguised under the pretext of the empowerment of local citizens. Such characterization ignores the ability of readers to critically analyse the message the media passes to them.

Conclusion

When analysing the thesis of cultural imperialism, one needs to adopt caution, as readers are actively involved in analysing the content of the newspaper and media producers are also conscious of particularities and sensibilities that exist across different categories of readers and in different settings and locations. Differentiated content distributed to different audiences through newspapers, made possible because of localization, discounts the thesis of the domination of Western culture in developing countries. In the case of *Upcountry City-Bhaskar*, we have seen that the newspaper owner does not want to go against the *sanskriti*, but trying to promote urban lifestyles, which shows that it is not the dominance of foreign culture, but that there is contestation between the urban and local culture. Conversely, it also reflects cultural sensibilities of the media producers towards the local culture and lifestyles. Such complexities, ingrained in the operation and functioning of Hindi newspapers, can therefore be best characterized as vernacular modernity, which provides actors with a certain autonomy, rather than imposing a blanket imitation of Western culture.

At the same time, localization has also resulted in a trivialization of news that emerged with a simultaneous empowerment of local citizens who cannot be reached by English-language newspapers. Through localization, Hindi newspapers have created a niche which cannot be matched by either the English-language newspapers or television. Therefore, the binary discourse of either/or does not seem appropriate in the light of empirical evidence from the micro-level. In their expansion, Hindi newspapers have adopted state-of-the-art technology, but have been very careful to deliver appropriate content to readers. There do not seem to be any disagreements when adopting Western technology as the example of *Dainik Bhaskar* shows, but when it comes to Western culture, Hindi newspapers are discriminating and have adopted a stealth approach. By providing hybrid content, the Hindi newspaper has expanded its social constituency. No doubt, Hindi publics receive information about global celebrities, but such information is packaged and reconfigured to suit local tastes and sensibilities. Vernacular modernity has enabled both media producers and consumers to claim cultural autonomy.

Notes

This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) Conference (1–3 July 2008), Melbourne, Australia. I am grateful to Gyanesh Kudaisya, Rahul Mukherji and Robin Jeffrey for their useful comments and guidance. I am also indebted to Sarah Moser, Hussain Ahmed and Ursula Rao for helpful comments on an earlier draft. Remaining shortcomings are entirely my responsibility.

1. I have used the term 'cultural/media imperialism' because the thesis of cultural imperialism principally emphasizes the alleged global dominance of American media and cultural images. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1972), when commenting on the nature of emerging journalism in the late 19th century, expressed a sense of pessimism.

2. For criticisms of the theory of cultural/media imperialism see Cunningham et al. (1998), Thompson (1995) and Tomlinson (1991). In the context of India, Sonwalker (2001) has criticized the theory of media imperialism by showing the resilience of national and regional media, which compete effectively with foreign satellite media. Also see Chadha and Kavoori (2000).

3. Next to Hindi is Bengali, which is spoken by 8.3 percent of India's population. For details, see Census of India (2001). The percentage of the population who speak and understand Hindi must be higher, as the Census of India does not include those who speak Hindi as a second language.

4. The Hindi newspapers have so far not been able to dismantle the dominance of English-language newspapers in the economic sphere as, despite the tremendous growth of readership of Hindi dailies, their combined advertising revenues still remain far below the advertising revenues commanded by English-language dailies, despite the low readerships of the latter. According to IRS (2008), round II, there were five Hindi newspapers that figured in the top ten list, while there was only one English-language newspaper in the list. However, the share of English-language newspapers of total advertising revenue was 53 percent, and 23 percent for Hindi newspapers (AdEx India, 2007).

5. Rajagopal (2001) has used the term 'split public' to describe the division between the elite who read the English-language press and a substantial but different public who read the Hindi-language press. While I am aware of the problems of such binary constructions, I am using them to emphasize the extent such views were prevalent in the public sphere.

6. Rahul Dev is Editor-in-Chief of CNEB, a Hindi news channel. He is a noted Hindi journalist in India. Interviewed on 10 October 2008, New Delhi.

7. Interviewed on 30 October 2006, Bhopal.

8. Interviewed on 29 November 2006, Bhopal.

9. Interviewed on 27 October 2006, Bhopal.

10. Interview with Ramesh Chandra Agarwal, 29 November 2006, Bhopal.

11. The Ram Janmabhumi–Babri mosque controversy is the most important political event of Independent India. According to the Hindu holy book, the Ramayana, Lord Ram was born in Ayodhya. Advocates of the Ayodhya movement claim that the first Mogul emperor, Babar, built the Babri mosque on the same site in 1528 by destroying the temple. Some radical Hindu groups have demanded that the temple be rebuilt at the original site. The Ram Janmabhumi movement to rebuild the temple accelerated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which ultimately led to the destruction of the Babri mosque on 6 December 1992. In the entire controversy, the Hindi press played a leading role by misreporting events, which resulted in rising circulation for Hindi newspapers. For a detailed study of the leading role of Hindi newspapers in the controversy see Nandy et al. (1995), Engineer (1991), Rajagopal (2001) and Hasan (1998).

12. On 10 December 1992, *Dainik Bhaskar* published an article titled 'Tum Nahin Jante, Tum Kiya Kar Rahe Ho'. This article appealed to the people of Bhopal to maintain the communal harmony and blamed the government for being unable to stop the communal riots in the city.

13. Since 1991, when satellite channels started coming to India, the newspapers' share of total advertising revenue has been sliding, while that of television has been increasing continuously. The newspapers' share in the total advertisement revenues fell from 73 percent in 1990 to 46 percent in 2005, whereas during the same period,

the share of television in the total advertising revenue increased from 23 percent to 44 percent. For details (see Kohli, 2006: 20–1).

14. 'From 1984 to 1988, the number of computers increased ten-fold, the computer industry's revenues increased four-fold, and computer software exports increased five-fold' (Singhal and Rogers, 1989: 155). This clearly reflects that technology was making rapid strides during this period.

15. Interviewed on 12 December 2007, Bhopal.

16. Kalpesh Yegnik, interviewed on 16 December 2004, Bhopal.

17. A *Kasba* is something between a small town and a village.

References

- AdEx India (2007) Mumbai: TAM Media Research.
- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appadurai, A. and C.A. Breckenridge (1995) 'Public Modernity in India', pp. 1–20 in C.A. Breckenridge (ed.) *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bhabha, H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Census of India (2001) New Delhi: Government of India.
- Chadha, K. and A. Kavoori (2000) 'Media Imperialism Revisited', *Media Culture & Society* 22(4): 415–32.
- Cunningham, S., E. Jacka and J. Sinclair (1998) 'Global and Regional Dynamics of International Television Flows', pp. 1777–92 in D.K. Thussu (ed.) *Electronic Empires: Global Media and Local Resistance*. London: Arnold.
- Dobhal, S. (2004) 'Circulation Pasha', *Business Today* 28 March.
- Eckerman, I. (2005) *The Bhopal Saga: Causes and Consequences of the World's Largest Industrial Disaster*. Hyderabad: Universities Press.
- Eisenstadt, S.N. (2000) 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus* 29(1): 1–29.
- Engineer, A.A. (1991) 'Press on Ayodhya "Kar seva"', *Economic and Political Weekly* 26(20): 1263–6.
- Featherstone, M. (1993) 'Global and Local Cultures', pp. 169–87 in J. Bird (ed.) *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. London: Routledge.
- Giddens, A. (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1990) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. F. Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hasan, Z. (1998) *Quest for Power: Oppositional Movements and Post-Congress Politics in Uttar Pradesh*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Herman, E.S. and R.W. McChesney (1997) *Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*. London: Cassell.
- Horkheimer, M. and T.W. Adorno (1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming. New York: Seabury Press.
- IRS (Indian Readership Survey) (2008) New Delhi: Media Users Research.
- Jeffrey, R. (1993) 'Indian-language Newspapers and Why They Grow', *Economic and Political Weekly* 28(38): 2004–11.
- Jeffrey, R. (2000) *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian-language Press 1977–99*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kohli, V. (2006) *The Indian Media Business*, rev. edn. New Delhi: Sage.
- Mattelart, A. (1983) *Transnationals and the Third World: The Struggle for Culture*, trans. D. Buxton. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.

- Nandy, A., S. Trivedy, S. Mayaram and A. Yagnik (1995) *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- 'New King on the Block' (1999) *Business India* 14–27 June: 107–8.
- Ninan, S. (2007) *Headlines from the Heartland: Reinventing the Hindi Public Sphere*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Press Council of India (1991) *Annual Report (1 April 1990–31 March 1991)*. New Delhi: .
- NRS (National Readership Survey) (2006) New Delhi: National Readership Studies Council.
- Rajagopal, A. (2001) *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public Sphere in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ritzer, G. (1996) *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Robertson, R. (1995) 'Glocalization: Time–Space and Homogeneity–Heterogeneity', pp. 25–44 in M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (eds) *Global Modernities*. London: Sage.
- Schiller, H. (1976) *Communication and Cultural Domination*. White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences.
- Shim, D. (2006) 'Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia', *Media, Culture & Society* 28(1): 25–44.
- Shrivastava, P. (1992) *Bhopal: Anatomy of a Crisis*, 2nd edn. London: P. Chapman Publications.
- Singhal, A. and E.M. Rogers (1989) *India's Information Revolution*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Sinha, K.P. and K. Pariher (2002) 'Dainik Bhaskar – Jaipur', *Asian Case Research Journal* 6(2): 167–204.
- Sonwalker, P. (2001) 'India: Makings of Little Cultural/Media Imperialism?', *International Communication Gazette* 63(9): 505–19.
- Stahlberg, P. (2002) *Lucknow Daily: How a Hindi Newspaper Constructs Society*. Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology.
- 'Sunrise Daily', *Business India* 30 April–13 May: 98–9.
- Taylor, C. (1999) 'Two Theories of Modernity', *Public Culture* 11(1): 153–74.
- Therborn, G. (1995) 'Routes to/through Modernity', pp. 124–39 in M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (eds) *Global Modernities*. London: Sage.
- Thompson, J.B. (1995) *Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Thussu, D.K. (2007) 'Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-flow', pp. 11–32 in D.K. Thussu (ed.) *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-flow*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Tibi, B. (1998) *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Tomlinson, J. (1991) *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Continuum.

Tabereh Ahmed Neyazi is a JSPS Fellow in Kyoto University. He received his PhD from the National University of Singapore in 2009. Prior to joining Kyoto University, he was a Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center, Hawaii. Address: Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, 46 Yoshida Shimoadachi-cho, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, 606-8501, Japan. [email: tneyazi@yahoo.com]