

**Response to Urban Larssen's
"Imagining a World of Free Expression in the Making:
Romania and Global Media Development"**

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Larssen prefaces his paper by telling us that this is very much a work-in-progress rather than a finished paper, and that is quite clear. Rather than presenting one central argument, he raises several interesting and useful ideas, and essentially invites comment. I liked that approach, and I will try to respond in the same spirit.

In the developing field of media anthropology, as I've argued in the paper cited by Larssen, journalism and news have not had a central place. In the two main collections that seek to define the field (Askew and Wilks and Larkin, Abu-Lughod, Ginsberg), the importance of news is acknowledged but not addressed. The focus of both collections is on entertainment media, as it also has been in cultural studies, with "journalism studies" often comprising an almost separate discourse. Certainly there is a growing number of anthropologists who study journalism, but there is not yet a unified field here. Yet as Larssen points out, in today's mediated world, the role of news (and other media that make claims on reality) is crucial for understanding almost any social and cultural phenomenon. In almost any society now, anthropologists must take into account the question of how issues are presented in the news media - how can we talk about cultural attitudes to the war in Iraq, or abortion, or same-sex marriage, without looking carefully at how these issues are framed through media? For instance, an anthropologist who studied the discourse of euthanasia in the Netherlands (through traditional ethnography as well as analysis of media) concluded that in that country the debate does not center around issues of religion and faith, whereas in the United States, in common with many issues, the religious arguments are inescapable. So as Larssen suggests, the study of journalism and journalistic discourse should be central to media anthropology, and to anthropology generally. (In saying this, I do not want to suggest that "news" and "entertainment" are two entirely distinct discourses; of course they are not. But as Larssen argues, the discourse about news, whether popular discourse or that of media critics/academics, suggests a special role for media that make explicit claims on reality).

So I liked Larssen's approach to understanding the rapidly-changing identity of news media in Romania, which he will elaborate in the dissertation. While he could have focused entirely on an ethnography of newsmaking, he saw how important it would be to understand the global discourse on what "real" journalism is, and how that affected the way the news was developing in that country. This interface between the global and the local clearly is a central concern for contemporary anthropology, as articulated in the work of Appadurai and the many who have followed him. Larssen asks the question: Are the values of democratic journalism universal, as indeed they tend to be presented in the professional discourse? Or are local cultural conditions so unique and specific that each context will develop its own understanding of what journalism is?

And of course this debate is not something that began in anthropology only after the contested discourse of globalization began to take hold. It is at the heart of anthropology's long-standing wrestling match between notions of cultural relativism and universal human rights. Most of us, I think, now accept the basic premise that there are universal rights - and that perhaps a free press, aimed at somehow uncovering the truth about the world, is one of those rights. That certainly would seem to be the basis for the global media development movement discussed by Larssen. At the same time, as anthropologists we value the uniqueness of the

local. We celebrate, for example, evidence that suggests resistance to Western popular culture - people who take Western texts and turn them into something else through a variety of media-related practices. So should journalism also have its own culturally-unique set of practices that may bear very little relationships to traditional (and largely U.S.-based) notions of fairness, balance, and objectivity? For instance, as researchers into the phenomenon of "tabloidisation" have suggested, a movement towards greater personalization, subjectivity, and sensationalism, largely decried in the West as lowering of standards, may actually be liberating in post-Soviet contexts.

Furthermore, even while NGO's and the other bearers of the professional, reforming discourse of journalism continue to present such basic, objective ideals as natural, the critique within media studies has essentially deconstructed these very notions. We know, for example, that the ideology of objectivity often hobbles journalists, forcing them to report "both sides" of a story, even when common sense tells them that only one side is actually "true;" or dutifully reporting the official words of the Bush administration without comment, because such comments would become "analysis," and thus outside the boundaries of real journalism.

In all, I found Larssen's paper thought-provoking and useful. While Romania is his subject, in this paper his goal is not so much to speak of that country but rather to raise issues about how anthropologists might contribute to the larger understanding of the role of news in creating reality both locally and globally. There were many things he was not able to mention; for instance, he touches on, but does not elaborate how the rise of new media, citizen journalism, blogs and so on, are already beginning to transform the professional authority of journalism. Will the discourse of universal democratic media, fairness, and objectivity survive this transformation? And if it does not, have we lost something very important? For all my argument (which Larssen cites) that we need to understand the local context of journalism, I also believe as he does, that journalists, like anthropologists have a duty to seek the truth, however contested that has become. He offers us some useful ideas to move the anthropology of news and journalism forward, and I look forward to reading the comments to follow.